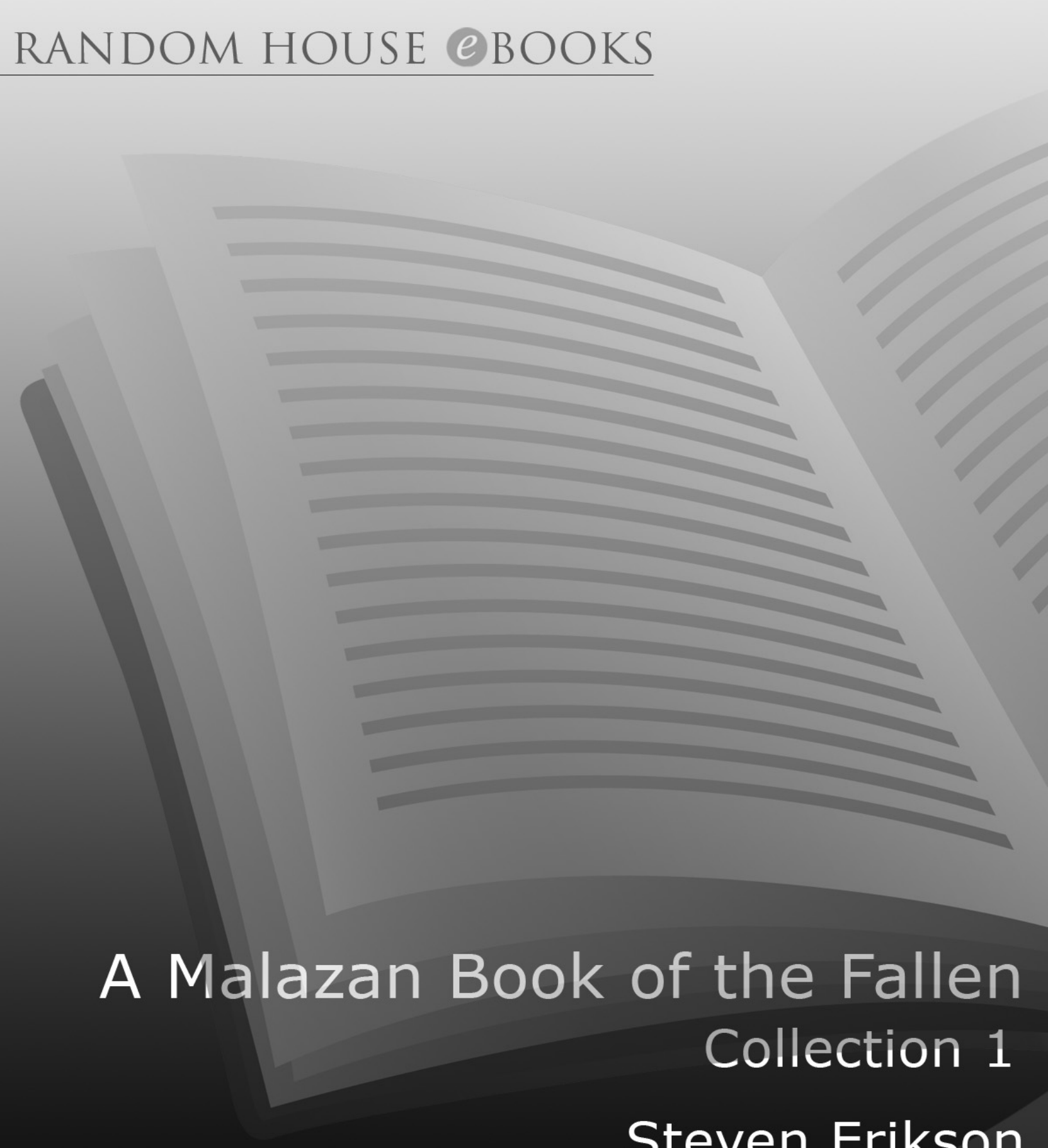
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



A Malazan Book of the Fallen

Collection 1

Steven Erikson

Gardens of The Moon
Deadhouse Gates

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Steven Erikson is an archaeologist and anthropologist and a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. The first seven novels in his *Malazan Book of the Fallen* sequence – *Gardens of the Moon, Deadhouse Gates, Memories of Ice, House of Chains, Midnight Tides, The Bonehunters* and Reaper's *Gale* – have met with widespread international acclaim and established him as a major voice in the world of fantasy fiction. The thrilling eighth installment in this remarkable story, *Toll the Hounds*, is coming soon from Bantam Press. Steven Erikson lives in British Columbia, Canada.

Acclaim for Steven Erikson's *The Malazan Book of the Fallen:*

'Steven Erikson is an extraordinary writer ... My advice to anyone who might listen to me is: treat yourself **Stephen R. Donaldson**

'Give me the evocation of a rich, complex and yet ultimately unknowable other world, with a compelling suggestion of intricate history and mythology and lore. Give me mystery amid the grand narrative ... Give me the world in which every sea hides a crumbled Atlantis, every ruin has a tale to tell, every broken blade is a silent legacy of struggles unknown. Give me in other words, the fantasy work of Steven Erikson ... a master of lost and forgotten epochs, a weaver of ancient epics' ***Salon.com***

'I stand slack-jawed in awe of *The Malazan Book of the Fallen.* This masterwork of the imagination may be the high watermark of epic fantasy' **Glen Cook**

'Truly epic in scope, Erikson has no peer when it comes to action and imagination, and joins the ranks of Tolkien and Donaldson in his mythic vision and perhaps then goes one better' ***SF Site***

'Rare is the writer who so fluidly combines a sense of mythic power and depth of world with fully realized characters and thrilling action, but Steven Erikson manages it spectacularly' **Michael A. Stackpole**

www.rbooks.co.uk/stevenerikson

'Like the archaeologist that he is, Erikson continues to delve into the history and ruins of the Malazan Empire, in the process revealing unforeseen riches and annals that defy expectation ... this is true myth in the making, a drawing upon fantasy to recreate histories and legends as rich as any found within our culture' ***Interzone***

'Gripping, fast-moving, delightfully dark ... Erikson brings a punchy, mesmerizing writing style into the genre of epic fantasy, making an indelible impression. Utterly engrossing' **Elizabeth Hayden**

'Everything we have come to expect from this most excellent of fantasy writers; huge in scope, vast in implication and immensely, utterly entertaining' ***alienonline***

'One of the most promising new writers of the past few years, he has more than proved his right to A-list status' ***Bookseller***

'Erikson's strengths are his grown-up characters and his ability to create a world every bit as intricate and messy as our own' **J. V. Jones**

'An author who never disappoints on delivering stunning and hard-edged fantasy is Steven Erikson ... a master of modern fantasy' ***WBQ*** magazine

'Wondrous voyages, demons and gods abound ... dense and complex ... ultimately rewarding' ***Locus***

'Erikson... is able to create a world that is both absorbing on a human level and full of magical sublimity... A wonderfully grand conception ... splendidly written ... fiendishly readable' **Adam Roberts**

'A multi-layered tale of magic and war, loyalty and betrayal. Complexly drawn characters occupy a richly detailed world in this panoramic saga' ***Library Journal***

'Epic in every sense of the word ... Erikson shows a masterful control of an immense plot... the worlds of mortals and gods meet in what is a truly awe-inspiring clash' ***Enigma***

Gardens of the Moon

A Tale of the

Malazan Book of the Fallen

STEVEN ERIKSON



BANTAM BOOKS

LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

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This novel is dedicated to
I. C. Esslemont
worlds to *conquer worlds to share*

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Preface to *Gardens of the Moon* redux

There is no point in beginning something without ambition. In so many aspects of my life I have held to that notion, and it has led to more than one fiery crash through the years. I still recall, with some bitterness, the response Cam (Ian C. Esslemont) and I received when flogging our co-written feature film and television scripts: 'Wonderful! Unique! Very funny, very dark... but here in Canada, well, we just can't budget for this stuff. Good luck.' In many ways, it was what followed by way of advice that proved the most crushing. 'Try something ... simpler. Something like everything else out there. Something less ... *ambitious.'*

We'd walk out of meetings frustrated, despondent, baffled. Did we really hear an invitation to mediocrity? Sure sounded like it.

Well, screw that.

Gardens *of the* Moon. Just to muse on that title resurrects all those notions of ambition, all that youthful ferocity that seemed to drive me headlong against a wall time and again. The need to *push.* Defy convention. Go for the throat.

I like to think I was entirely aware of what I was doing back then. That my vision was crystal clear and that I was actually standing there, ready to spit in the face of the genre, even as I reveled in it (for how could I not? As much as I railed against the tropes, I loved reading the stuff). Now, I'm not so sure. It's easy to ride on instinct in the moment, only to look back later and attribute cogent mindfulness to everything that worked (while ignoring everything that didn't). Too easy.

In the years and many novels since, certain facts have made themselves plain. Beginning with *Gardens of the* Moon, readers will either hate my stuff or love it. There's no in-between. Naturally, I'd rather everybody loved it, but I understand why this will never be the case. These are not lazy books. You can't float through, you just can't. Even more problematic, the first novel begins halfway through a seeming marathon – you either hit the ground running and stay on your feet or you're toast.

When challenged with writing this preface, I did consider for a time using it as a means of gentling the blow, of easing the shock of being dropped from a great height into very deep water, right there on page one of *Gardens of the* Moon. Some background, some history, some setting of the stage. I've since mostly rejected the idea. Dammit, I don't recall Frank Herbert doing anything like that with *Dune,* and if any novel out there was a direct inspiration in terms of structure, that was the one. I'm writing a history and fictional or not, history has no real beginning point; even the rise and fall of civilizations are far more muddled on the front and back ends than many people might think.

Gardens of the Moon's bare bones first saw life in a role-playing game. Its first draught was as a feature film co-written by the two creators of the Malazan world, myself and Ian C. Esslemont; a script that languished for lack of interest ('we don't do fantasy films because they suck. It's a dead genre. It involves costumes and costume dramas are as dead as Westerns' – all this before a whole slew of production companies shoved that truism in their faces, all this long before *Lord of the Rings* hit the big screen).

And that was just it. We were there. We had the goods, we knew that Adult Epic Fantasy was film's last unexplored genre – we didn't count *Willow,* which only earned merit in our eyes for the crossroads scene; the rest of the stuff was for kids through and through. And all the other films coming out in that genre were either B flicks or egregiously flawed in our eyes (gods, what could have been done with *Conan!).* We wanted a Fantasy version of *The Lion in Winter,* the one with O'Toole and Hepburn. Or *The Three Musketeers* adaptation with Michael York, Oliver Reed, Raquel Welch, Richard Chamberlain, etc, just add magic, mates. Our favourite television production was Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective,* the

original one with Gambon and Malahyde. We wanted sophisticated shit, you see. We were pushing Fantasy in that sizzling, scintillating context of jaw-dropping admiration. We were, in other words, as ambitious as hell.

Probably, too, we weren't ready. We didn't quite have the stuff. Thinking past our abilities, trapped in the lack of experience. The curse of the young.

When life took Cam in one direction and me in another, we both carried with us the notes for an entire created world. Constructed through hours upon hours of gaming. We had an enormous history all worked out – the raw material for twenty novels, twice as many films. And we each had copies of a script nobody wanted. The Malazan world was there in hundreds of hand-drawn maps, in pages upon pages of raw notes, in GURPS (Steve Jackson's Generic Universal Role Playing System – an alternative to AD&D) character sheets, building floor-plans, sketches, you name it.

The decision to begin writing the history of the Malazan world began a few years later. I would convert the script into a novel. Cam would write a related novel entitled *Return of the Crimson Guard* (and now, all these years later, and fresh on the heels of his Night *of Knives*, Cam's first epic, Return, is going to be published). As works of fiction, authorship would belong to the actual writer, the person putting word after word onto the page. For *Gardens*, the conversion meant almost starting from scratch. The script was three acts all set in Darujhistan. The main events were the assassin war on the rooftops and the grand, explosive finale of the fete. There was virtually nothing else. No back story, no context, no real introduction of characters. It was, in fact, more *Raiders of the Lost Ark* than *The Lion in Winter.*

Ambition never goes away. It may shuffle off, grumbling, feet dragging, only to slide across into something else – usually the next project. It doesn't take 'no' for an answer.

In writing *Gardens,* I quickly discovered that 'back story' was going to be a problem no matter how far back I went. And I realized that, unless I spoon-fed my potential readers (something I refused to do, having railed often enough at writers of fantasy epics treating us readers as if we were idiots), unless I 'simplified', unless I slipped down into the well-worn tracks

of what's gone before, I was going to leave readers floundering. And not just readers, but editors, publishers, agents...

But, you know, as a reader, as a fan, I never minded floundering – at least for a little while, and sometimes for a long while. So long as other stuff carried me along, I was fine. Don't forget, I worshipped Dennis Potter. I was a fan of DeLillo's *The Names* and Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum.* The reader I had in mind was one who could and would carry the extra weight – the questions not yet answered, the mysteries, the uncertain alliances.

History has proved this out, I think. Readers either bail on the series somewhere in the first third of *Gardens of the* Moon, or they're still sharing the ride to this day, seven going on eight books later.

I have been asked, would I have done it any differently in hindsight? And I honestly don't have an answer to that. Oh, there are elements of style that I'd change here and there, but ... fundamentally, I'm just not sure what else I could have done. I am not and never will be a writer happy to deliver exposition that serves no other function than telling the reader about back story, history, or whatever. If my exposition doesn't have multiple functions – and I do mean multiple – then I'm not satisfied. Turns out, the more functions in it, the more complicated it gets, the more likely it will quietly shift into misdirection, into sleight of hand, and all the back story elements, while possibly there, end up buried and buried deep.

This was fast-paced writing, but it was also, bizarrely and in ways I still can't quite figure, *dense* writing. So, *Gardens* invites you to read rip-roaringly fast. But the author advises: you'd best not succumb to the temptation.

Here we are, years later now. Should I apologize for that bipolar invitation? To what extent did I shoot myself in the foot with the kind of introduction to the Malazan world as delivered in *Gardens of the Moon?.* And has this novel left me dancing on one foot ever since? Maybe. And sometimes, on midnight afternoons, I ask myself: what if I'd picked up that fat wooden ladle, and slopped the whole mess down the reader's throat, as some (highly successful) Fantasy writers do and have done? Would I now see my sales ranking in the bestseller's lists? Now hold on – am I suggesting that those

ultra popular Fantasy writers have found their success in writing down to their readers? Hardly. Well, not all of them. But then, consider it from my point of view. It took eight years and a move to the UK for Gardens *of the Moon* to find a publisher. It took four more years before a US deal was finalized. The complaint? 'Too complicated, too many characters. Too ... ambitious.'

I could take the fish-eyed retrospective angle here and say how *Gardens* marked a departure from the usual tropes of the genre, and any departure is likely to meet resistance; but my ego's not that big. It never felt like a departure. Glen Cook's *Dread Empire* and *Black Company* novels had already broken the new ground, but I'd read all those and, wanting more, I pretty much had to write them myself (and Cam felt the same). And while my style of writing did not permit imitation (he's a terse one, is Cook), I could certainly strive for the same tone of dispirited, wry cynicism, the same ambivalence and a similar sense of atmosphere. Maybe I was aware of the swing away from Good versus Evil, but that just seemed a by-product of growing up – the real world's not like that, why persist in making Fantasy worlds so fundamentally disconnected with reality?

Well, I don't know. It's exhausting just thinking about it.

Gardens is what it is. I have no plans on revision. I don't even know where I'd start.

Better, I think, to offer the readers a quick decision on this series – right there in the first third of the first novel, than to tease them on for five or six books before they turn away in disgust, disinterest or whatever. Maybe, from a marketing position, the latter is preferred – at least in the short term. But, thank God, my publishers know a false economy when they see one.

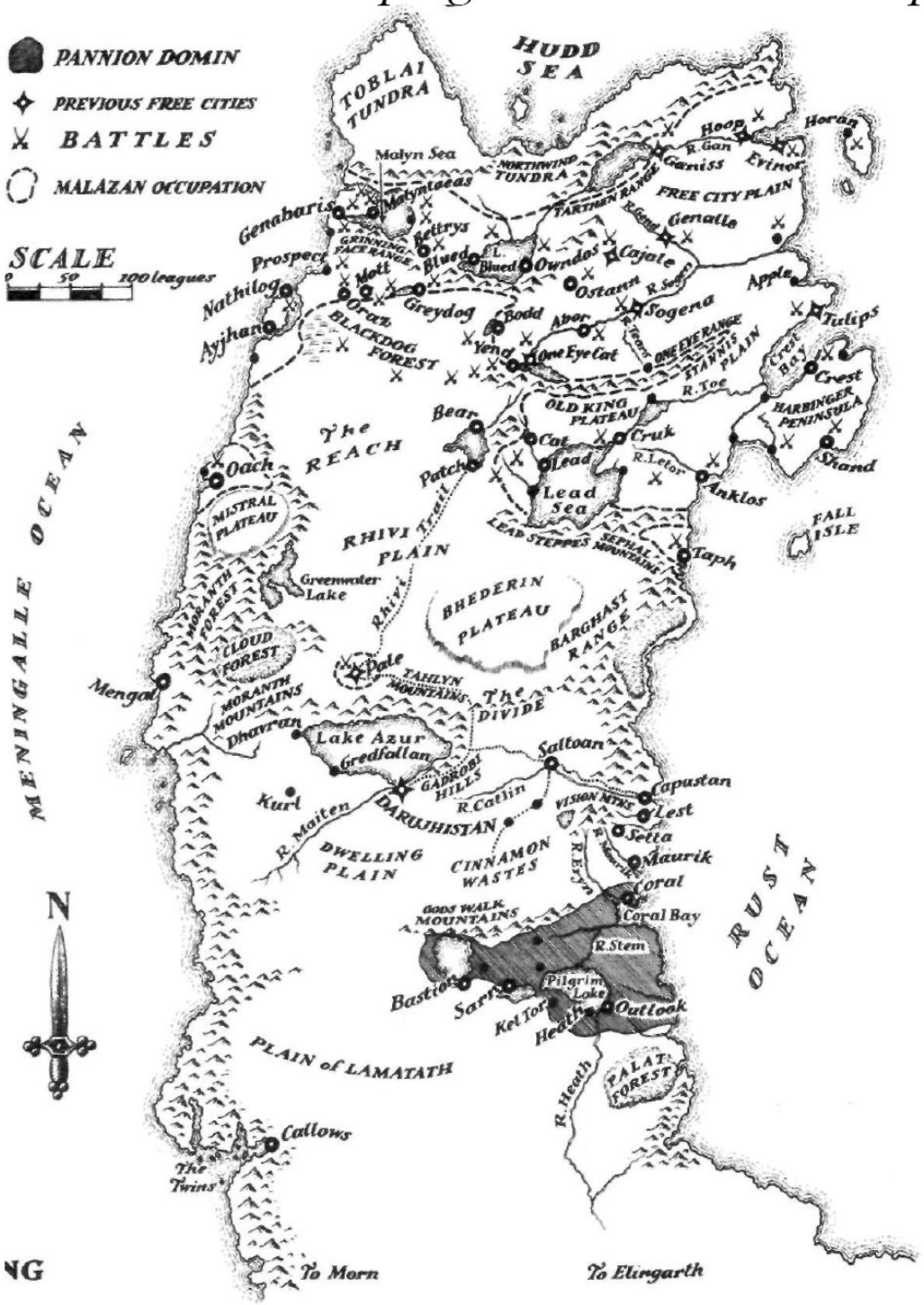
Gardens of the Moon is an invitation, then. Stay with it, and come along for the ride. I can only promise that I have done my best to entertain. Curses and cheers, laughter and tears, it's all in here.

One last word to all you nascent writers out there. Ambition is not a dirty word. Piss on compromise. Go for the throat. Write with balls, write with eggs. Sure, it's a harder journey but take it from me, it's well worth it.

Cheers,
Steven Erikson
Victoria, British Columbia
December 2007

GENABACKIS:

The Malazan Campaign ca 1160 Burn's Sleep



Darujhistan




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AZUR
TENDER ISLAND
Lighthouse
Mole
Worrytown
Jatem's Worry
SECOND TIER WALL
THIRD TIER WALL
ESTATE DISTRICT
GADAR QUARRY
Urs
Hinter Road
HILLS
Farms
N
1 Arms Quarter
2 Warden Barracks (City Watch)
3 Quip's Bar
4 Phoenix Inn
5 Borthen Park
6 Majesty Hill
7 Despot's Barbican
8 Krul's Hill
9 Orr Estate
10 High Gallows Hill
11 Baruk's Estate
12 Simtal Estate
13 Hinter's Tower

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THE MALAZAN EMPIRE

ONEARM'S HOST

Tattersail, Cadre Sorceress, 2nd Army, a reader of the Deck of Dragons

Hairlock, Cadre Mage, 2nd Army, an unpleasant rival of Tayschrenn

Calot, Cadre Mage, 2nd Army, Tattersail's lover

Toc the Younger, scout, 2nd Army, a Claw agent badly scarred at the Siege of Pale

THE BRIDGEBURNERS

Sergeant Whiskeyjack, 9th Squad, past commander of the 2nd Army

Corporal Kalam, 9th Squad, an ex-Claw from Seven Cities

Quick Ben, 9th Squad, a Seven Cities Mage

Sorry, 9th Squad, **a** deadly killer in the guise of a young girl

Hedge, 9th Squad, a sapper

Fiddler, 9th Squad, a sapper

Trotts, 9th Squad, **a** Barghast warrior

Mallet, 9th Squad, the squad healer

Sergeant Antsy, 7th Squad

Picker, 7th Squad

THE IMPERIAL COMMAND

Ganoes Stabro Paran, a noble-born officer in the Malazan Empire

Dujek Onearm, High Fist, Malazan Armies, Genabackis Campaign

Tayschrenn, High Mage to the Empress

Bellurdan, High Mage to the Empress

Nightchill, High Sorceress to the Empress

A'Karonys, High Mage to the Empress

Lorn, Adjunct to the Empress

Topper, Commander of the Claw

Empress Laseen, Ruler of the Malazan Empire

HOUSE PARAN (UNTA)

Tavore, Ganoes' sister (middle-child)

Felisin, Ganoes' youngest sister

Garnet, House Guard and veteran

IN THE EMPEROR'S TIME

Emperor Kellanved, the founder of the Empire, assassinated by Laseen

Dancer, the Emperor's chief adviser, assassinated by Laseen

Surly, Laseen's old name when Commander of the Claw

Dassem Ultor, the First Sword of Empire, killed outside Y'ghatan, Seven Cities

Toc (the Elder), disappeared in Laseen's purges of the Old Guard

IN DARUJISTAN

The Phoenix Inn Regulars

Kruppe, a man of false modesty

Crokus Younghand, a young thief

Rallick Nom, an assassin in the Guild

Murillio, a courtier

Coll, a drunk

Meese, a regular

Irilta, a regular

Scurve, the barman

Sulty, a serving woman

Chert, an unlucky bully

The T'orrud Cabal

Baruk, a High Alchemist

Derudan, a Witch of Tennes

Mammot, a High Priest of D'riss and eminent scholar, uncle to Crokus

Travale, a pious soldier of the Cabal

Tholis, a High Mage

Parald, a High Mage

The Council

Turban Orr, a powerful councilman and Simtal's lover

Lim, an ally of Turban Orr

Simtal, Lady of Simtal Estate

Estraysian D'Arle, a rival of Turban Orr

Challice D'Arle, his daughter

The Guild of Assassins

Vorcan, Mistress of the Guild (also known as the Master of Assassins)

Ocelot, Rallick Nom's Clan Leader

Talo Krafar, an assassin of Jurrig Denatte's Clan

Krute of Talient, an agent of the Guild

Also in the city:

The Eel, a rumoured master-spy

Circle Breaker, an agent of the Eel

Vildrom, a city guard

Captain Stillis, Captain of Guard, Simtal Estate

Further players:

The Tiste Andii

Anomander Rake, Lord of Moon's Spawn, Son of Darkness, Knight of Darkness

Serrat, second-in-command to Rake

Korlat, a night-hunter and blood-kin to Serrat

Orfantal, a night-hunter

Horult, a night-hunter

The T'lan Imass

Logros, Commander of the T'lan Imass Clans serving the Malazan Empire

Onos T'oolan, a clanless warrior

Pran Chole, a Bonecaster (shaman) of the Kron T'lan Imass

Kig Avert, a Clan Leader

Others:

Crone, a Great Raven and servant to Anomander Rake

Silanah, an Eleint and companion to Anomander Rake

Raest, a Jaghut Tyrant

K'rul, an Elder God, the Maker of Paths

Caladan Brood, the warlord, opposing the Malazan armies in the North Campaign

Kallor, Brood's second-in-command

Prince K'azz D'Avore, Commander of the Crimson Guard

Jorrick Sharplance, a Crimson Guard officer

Cowl, a High Mage in the Crimson Guard

Corporal Blues, Sixth Blade of the Crimson Guard

Fingers, Sixth Blade of the Crimson Guard

The Hound Baran, a Hound of Shadow

The Hound Blind, a Hound of Shadow

The Hound Gear, a Hound of Shadow

The Hound Rood, a Hound of Shadow

The Hound Shan, a Hound of Shadow

The Hound Doan, a Hound of Shadow

The Hound Ganrod, a Hound of Shadow

Shadowthrone/Ammanas, Ruler of the Warren of Shadow

The Rope/Cotillion, Companion of Shadowthrone and Patron of Assassins

Icarium, Builder of the Wheel of Ages in Darujhistan

Mappo, Icarium's companion

The Pannion Seer, a Prophet Tyrant ruling the Pannion Domin

Gardens of the Moon

Now these ashes have grown cold, we open the old book.
These oil-stained pages recount the tales of the Fallen,
a frayed empire, words without warmth. The hearth
has ebbed, its gleam and life's sparks are but memories
against dimming eyes – what cast my mind, what hue my
thoughts as I open the Book of the Fallen
and breathe deep the scent of history?
Listen, then, to these words carried on that breath.
These tales are the tales of us all, again yet again.
We are history relived and that is aft, without end that is all.

The Emperor is dead!
So too his right hand – now cold, now severed!
But mark these dying shadows,
twinned and flowing bloody and beaten,
down and away from mortal sight...
From sceptre's rule dismissed,
from gild candelabra the light now fled,
from a hearth ringed in hard jewels,
seven years this warmth has bled ...

The Emperor is dead.
So too his master'd companion, the rope cut clean.
But mark this burgeoning return –
faltering dark, the tattered shroud –
embracing children in Empire's dying light.
Hear now the dirge faint reprised,
before the sun's fall, this day spills red
on buckled earth, and in obsidian eyes
vengeance chimes seven times ...

Call to Shadow (I.i. 1-18)
Felisin(b.ll46)

Prologue

1154th Year of Burn's Sleep
96th Year of the Malazan Empire
The Last Year of Emperor Kellanved's Reign

The stains of rust seemed to map blood seas on the black, pocked surface of Mock's Vane. A century old, it squatted on the point of an old pike that had been bolted to the outer top of the Hold's wall. Monstrous and misshapen, it had been cold-hammered into the form of a winged demon, teeth bared in a leering grin, and was tugged and buffeted in squealing protest with every gust of wind.

The winds were contrary the day columns of smoke rose over the Mouse Quarter of Malaz City. The Vane's silence announced the sudden falling-off of the sea breeze that came clambering over the ragged walls of Mock's Hold, then it creaked back into life as the hot, spark-scattered and smoke-filled breath of the Mouse Quarter reached across the city to sweep the promontory's heights.

Ganoes Stabro Paran of the House of Paran stood on tiptoe to see over the merlon. Behind him rose Mock's Hold, once capital of the Empire but now, since the mainland had been conquered, relegated once more to a Fist's holding. To his left rose the pike and its wayward trophy.

For Ganoes, the ancient fortification overlooking the city was too familiar to be of interest. This visit was his third in as many years; he'd long ago explored the courtyard with its heaved cobblestones, the Old Keep – now a stable, its upper floor home to pigeons and swallows and bats – and the citadel where even now his father negotiated the island export tithe with the

harbour officials. In the last instance, of course, a goodly portion was out of bounds, even for a son of a noble house; for it was in the citadel that the Fist had his residence, and in the inner chambers that such affairs of the Empire as concerned this island were conducted.

Mock's Hold forgotten behind him, Ganoes' attention was on the tattered city below, and the riots that ran through its poorest quarter. Mock's Hold stood atop a cliff. The higher land of the Pinnacle was reached by a switchback staircase carved into the limestone of the cliff wall. The drop to the city below was eighty armspans or more, with the Hold's battered wall adding still another six. The Mouse was at the city's inland edge, an uneven spreading of hovels and overgrown tiers cut in half by the silt-heavy river that crawled towards the harbour. With most of Malaz City between Ganoes' position and the riots, it was hard to make out any detail, beyond the growing pillars of black smoke.

It was midday, but the flash and thundering concussion of magery made the air seem dark and heavy.

Armour clanking, a soldier appeared along the wall near him. The man leaned vambraced forearms on the battlement, the scabbard of his longsword scraping against the stones. 'Glad for your pure blood, eh?' he asked, grey eyes on the smouldering city below.

The boy studied the soldier. He already knew the complete regimental accoutrements of the Imperial Army, and the man at his side was a commander in the Third – one of the Emperor's own, an elite. On his dark grey shoulder-cloak was a silver brooch: a bridge of stone, lit by ruby flames. A *Bridgeburner.*

High-ranking soldiers and officials of the Empire commonly passed through Mock's Hold. The island of Malaz remained a vital port of call, especially now that the Korel wars to the south had begun. Ganoes had brushed shoulders with more than his share, here and in the capital, Unta.

'Is it true, then?' Ganoes asked boldly.

'Is what true?'

'The First Sword of Empire. Dassem Ultor. We heard in the capital before we left. He's dead. Is it true? Is Dassem dead?'

The man seemed to flinch, his gaze unwavering on the Mouse. 'Such is war,' he muttered, under his breath, as if the words were not meant for anyone else's ears.

'You're with the Third. I thought the Third was with him, in Seven Cities. At Y'Ghatan—'

'Hood's Breath, they're still looking for his body in the still-hot rubble of that damned city, and here you are, a merchant's son three thousand leagues from Seven Cities with information only a few are supposed to possess.' He still did not turn. 'I know not your sources, but take my advice and keep what you know to yourself.'

Ganoes shrugged. 'It's said he betrayed a god.'

Finally the man faced him. His face was scarred, and something that might have been a burn marred his jaw and left cheek. For all that, he looked young for a commander. 'Heed the lesson there, son.'

'What lesson?'

'Every decision you make can change the world. The best life is the one the gods don't notice. You want to live free, boy, live quietly.'

'I want to be a soldier. A hero.'

'You'll grow out of it.'

Mock's Vane squealed as a wayward gust from the harbour cleared the grainy smoke. Ganoes could now smell rotting fish and the waterfront's stink of humanity.

Another Bridgeburner, this one with a broken, scorched fiddle strapped to his back, came up to the commander. He was wiry and if anything younger – only a few years older than Ganoes himself, who was twelve. Strange pockmarks covered his face and the backs of his hands, and his armour was a mixture of foreign accoutrements over a threadbare, stained uniform. A

shortsword hung in a cracked wooden scabbard at his hip. He leaned against the merlon beside the other man with the ease of long familiarity.

'It's a bad smell when sorcerers panic,' the newcomer said. 'They're losing control down there. Hardly the need for a whole cadre of mages, just to sniff out a few wax-witches.'

The commander sighed. 'Thought to wait to see if they'd rein themselves in.'

The soldier grunted. 'They are all new, untested. This could scar some of them for ever. Besides,' he added, 'more than a few down there are following someone else's orders.'

'A suspicion, no more.'

'The proof's right there,' the other man said. 'In the Mouse.'

'Perhaps.'

'You're too protective,' the man said. 'Surly says it's your greatest weakness.'

'Surly's the Emperor's concern, not mine.'

A second grunt answered that. 'Maybe all of us before too long.'

The commander was silent, slowly turning to study his companion.

The man shrugged. 'Just a feeling. She's taking a new name, you know. Laseen.'

'Laseen?'

'Napan word. Means—'

'I know what it means.'

'Hope the Emperor does, too.'

Ganoes said, 'It means Thronemaster.'

The two looked down at him.

The wind shifted again, making the iron demon groan on its perch – a smell of cool stone from the Hold itself. 'My tutor's Napan,' Ganoes explained.

A new voice spoke behind them, a woman's, imperious and cold. 'Commander.'

Both soldiers turned, but without haste. The commander said to his companion, 'The new company needs help down there. Send Dujek and a wing, and get some sappers to contain the fires – wouldn't do to have the whole city burn.'

The soldier nodded, marched away, sparing the woman not a single glance.

She stood with two bodyguards near the portal in the citadel's square tower. Her dusky blue skin marked her as Napan, but she was otherwise plain, wearing a salt-stained grey robe, her mousy hair cut short like a soldier's, her features thin and unmemorable. It was, however, her bodyguards that sent a shiver through Ganoes. They flanked her: tall, swathed in black, hands hidden in sleeves, hoods shadowing their faces. Ganoes had never seen a Claw before, but he instinctively knew these creatures to be acolytes of the cult. Which meant the woman was...

The commander said, 'It's your mess, Surly. Seems I'll have to clean it up.'

Ganoes was shocked at the absence of fear – the near-contempt in the soldier's voice. Surly had created the Claw, making it a power rivalled only by the Emperor himself.

'That is no longer my name, Commander.'

The man grimaced. 'So I've heard. You must be feeling confident in the Emperor's absence. He's not the only one who remembers you as nothing more than a serving-wench down in the Old Quarter. I take it the gratitude's washed off long since.'

The woman's face betrayed no change of expression to mark if the man's words had stung. 'The command was a simple one,' she said. 'It seems your new officers are unable to cope with the task.'

'It's got out of hand,' the commander said. 'They're unseasoned—'

'Not my concern,' she snapped. 'Nor am I particularly disappointed. Loss of control delivers its own lessons to those who oppose us.'

'Oppose? A handful of minor witches selling their meagre talents – to what sinister end? Finding the coraval schools on the shoals in the bay. Hood's Breath, woman, hardly a threat to the Empire.'

'Unsanctioned. Defiant of the new laws—'

'Your laws, Surly. They won't work, and when the Emperor returns he'll quash your prohibition of sorcery, you can be certain of that.'

The woman smiled coldly. 'You'll be pleased to know that the Tower's signalled the approach of the transports for your new recruits. We'll not miss you or your restless, seditious soldiers, Commander.'

Without another word, or a single glance spared for the boy standing beside the commander, she swung about and, flanked by her silent bodyguards, re-entered the citadel.

Ganoes and the commander returned their attention to the riot in the Mouse. Flames were visible, climbing through the smoke.

'One day I'll be a soldier,' Ganoes said.

The man grunted. 'Only if you fail at all else, son. Taking up the sword is the last act of desperate men. Mark my words and find yourself a more worthy dream.'

Ganoes scowled. 'You're not like the other soldiers I've talked to. You sound more like my father.'

'But I'm not your father,' the man growled.

'The world,' Ganoes said, 'doesn't need another wine merchant.'

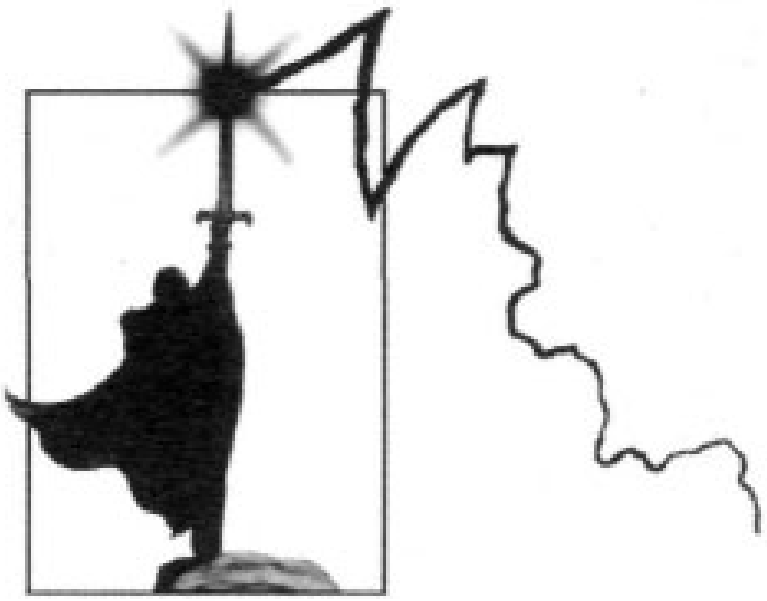
The commander's eyes narrowed, gauging. He opened his mouth to make the obvious reply, then shut it again.

Ganoes Paran looked back down at the burning quarter, pleased with himself. Even *a boy, Commander, can make a point.*

Mock's Vane swung once more. Hot smoke rolled over the wall, engulfing them. A reek of burning cloth, scorched paint and stone, and now of something sweet. 'An abattoir's caught fire,' Ganoes said. 'Pigs.'

The commander grimaced. After a long moment he sighed and leaned back down on the merlon. 'As you say, boy, as you say.'

BOOK ONE



PALE

... In the eighth year the Free Cities of Genabackis established contracts with a number of mercenary armies to oppose the Imperium's advance; prominent among these were the Crimson Guard, under the command of Prince K'azz D'Avore (see Volumes III & V); and the Tiste Andii regiments of Moon's Spawn, under the command of Caladan Brood and others.

The forces of the Malazan Empire, commanded by High Fist Dujek Onearm, consisted in that year of the 2nd, 5th and 6th Armies, as well as legions of Moranth.

In retrospect two observations can be made. The first is that the Moranth alliance of 1156 marked a fundamental change in the science of warfare for the Malazan Imperium, which would prove efficacious in the short term. The second observation worth noting is that the involvement of the sorcerous Tiste Andii of Moon's Spawn represented the beginning of the continent's Sorcery Enfilade, with devastating consequences.

In the Year of Burn's Sleep 1163, the Siege of Pale ended with a now legendary sorcerous conflagration ...

Imperial Campaigns 1158-1194

Volume TV, Genabackis
Imrygyn Tallobant (b.1151)

CHAPTER ONE

The old stones of this road
have rung with iron
black-shod hoofs and drums
where I saw him walking
up from the sea between the hills soaked red
in sunset he came, a boy among the echoes
sons and brothers all in ranks
of warrior ghosts he came to pass
where I sat on the worn final
league-stone at day's end –
his stride spoke loud all I needed
know of him on this road of stone –
the boy walks
another soldier, another one
bright heart not yet cooled
to hard iron

Mother's *Lament*
Anonymous

1161st *Year of Burn's Sleep*
103rd Year of the Malazan Empire
7th Year of Empress Laseen's Rule

'Prod and pull,' the old woman was saying, "tis the way of the Empress, as like the gods themselves.' She leaned to one side and spat, then brought a soiled cloth to her wrinkled lips. 'Three husbands and two sons I saw off to war.'

The fishergirl's eyes shone as she watched the column of mounted soldiers thunder past, and she only half listened to the hag standing beside

her. The girl's breath had risen to the pace of the magnificent horses. She felt her face burning, a flush that had nothing to do with the heat. The day was dying, the sun's red smear over the trees on her right, and the sea's sighing against her face had grown cool.

'That was in the days of the Emperor,' the hag continued. 'Hood roast the bastard's soul on a spit. But look on, lass. Laseen scatters bones with the best of them. Heh, she started with *his*, didn't she, now?'

The fishergirl nodded faintly. As befitted the lowborn, they waited by the roadside, the old woman burdened beneath a rough sack filled with turnips, the girl with a heavy basket balanced on her head. Every minute or so the old woman shifted the sack from one bony shoulder to the other. With the riders crowding them on the road and the ditch behind them a steep drop to broken rocks, she had no place to put down the sack.

'Scatters bones, I said. Bones of husbands, bones of sons, bones of wives and bones of daughters. All the same to her. All the same to the Empire.' The old woman spat a second time. 'Three husbands and two sons, ten coin apiece a year. Five of ten's fifty. Fifty coin a year's cold company, lass. Cold in winter, cold in bed.'

The fishergirl wiped dust from her forehead. Her bright eyes darted among the soldiers passing before her. The young men top their high-backed saddles held expressions stern and fixed straight ahead. The few women who rode among them sat tall and somehow fiercer than the men. The sunset cast red glints from their helms, flashing so that the girl's eyes stung and her vision blurred.

'You're the fisherman's daughter,' the old woman said. 'I seen you afore on the road, and down on the strand. Seen you and your dad at market. Missing an arm, ain't he? More bones for her collection is likely, eh?' She made a chopping motion with one hand, then nodded. 'Mine's the first house on the track. I use the coin to buy candles. Five candles I burn every night, five candles to keep old Rigga company. It's a tired house, full of tired things and me one of them, lass. What you got in the basket there?'

Slowly the fishergirl realized that a question had been asked of her. She pulled her attention from the soldiers and smiled down at the old woman. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'the horses are so loud.'

Rigga raised her voice. 'I asked what you got in your basket, lass?'

'Twine. Enough for three nets. We need to get one ready for tomorrow. Dadda lost his last one – something in the deep waters took it and a whole catch, too. Ilgrand Lender wants the money he loaned us and we need a catch tomorrow. A good one.' She smiled again and swept her gaze back to the soldiers. 'Isn't it wonderful?' she breathed.

Rigga's hand shot out and snagged the girl's thick black hair, yanked it hard.

The girl cried out. The basket on her head lurched, then slid down on to one shoulder. She grabbed frantically for it but it was too heavy. The basket struck the ground and split apart. 'Aaai!' the girl gasped, attempting to kneel. But Rigga pulled and snapped her head around.

'You listen to me, lass!' The old woman's sour breath hissed against the girl's face. 'The Empire's been grinding this land down for a hundred years. You was born in it. I wasn't. When I was your age Itko Kan was a country. We flew a banner and it was ours. We were free, lass.'

The girl was sickened by Rigga's breath. She squeezed shut her eyes.

'Mark this truth, child, else the Cloak of Lies blinds you for ever.' Rigga's voice took on a droning cadence, and all at once the girl stiffened. Rigga, *Riggalai the Seer, the wax-witch who trapped souls in candles and burned them. Souls devoured in flame*— Rigga's words carried the chilling tone of prophecy. 'Mark this truth. I am the last to speak to you. You are the last to hear me. Thus are we linked, you and I, beyond all else.'

Rigga's fingers snagged tighter in the girl's hair. 'Across the sea the Empress has driven her knife into virgin soil. The blood now comes in a tide and it'll sweep you under, child, if you're not careful. They'll put a sword in your hand, they'll give you a fine horse, and they'll send you across that sea. But a shadow will embrace your soul. Now, listen! Bury this

deep! Rigga will preserve you because we are linked, you and I. But it is all I can do, understand? Look to the Lord spawned in Darkness; his is the hand that shall free you, though he'll know it not—'

'What's this?' a voice bellowed.

Rigga swung to face the road. An outrider had slowed his mount. The Seer released the girl's hair.

The girl staggered back a step. A rock on the road's edge turned underfoot and she fell. When she looked up the out rider had trotted past. Another thundered up in his wake.

'Leave the pretty one alone, hag,' this one growled, and as he rode by he leaned in his saddle and swung an open, gauntleted hand. The iron-scaled glove cracked against Rigga's head, spinning her around. She toppled.

The fishergirl screamed as Rigga landed heavily across her thighs. A thread of crimson spit spattered her face. Whimpering, the girl pushed herself back across the gravel, then used her feet to shove away Rigga's body. She climbed to her knees.

Something within Rigga's prophecy seemed lodged in the girl's head, heavy as a stone and hidden from light. She found she could not retrieve a single word the Seer had said. She reached out and grasped Rigga's woollen shawl. Carefully, she rolled the old woman over. Blood covered one side of Rigga's head, running down behind the ear. More blood smeared her lined chin and stained her mouth. The eyes stared sightlessly.

The fishergirl pulled back, unable to catch her breath. Desperate, she looked about. The column of soldiers had passed, leaving nothing but dust and the distant tremble of hoofs. Rigga's bag of turnips had spilled on to the road. Among the trampled vegetables lay five tallow candles. The girl managed a ragged lungful of dusty air. Wiping her nose, she looked to her own basket.

'Never mind the candles,' she mumbled, in a thick, odd voice. 'They're gone, aren't they, now? Just a scattering of bones. Never mind.' She crawled towards the bundles of twine that had fallen from the breached basket, and

when she spoke again her voice was young, normal. 'We need the twine. We'll work all night and get one ready. Dadda's waiting. He's right at the door, he's looking up the track, he's waiting to see me.'

She stopped, a shiver running through her. The sun's light was almost gone. An unseasonal chill bled from the shadows, which now flowed like water across the road.

'Here it comes, then,' the girl grated softly, in a voice that wasn't her own.

A soft-gloved hand fell on her shoulder. She ducked down, cowering.

'Easy, girl,' said a man's voice. 'It's over. Nothing to be done for her now.'

The fishergirl looked up. A man swathed in black leaned over her, his face obscured beneath a hood's shadow. 'But he hit her,' the girl said, in a child's voice. 'And we have nets to tie, me and Dadda—'

'Let's get you on your feet,' the man said, moving his long-fingered hands down under her arms. He straightened, lifting her effortlessly. Her sandalled feet dangled in the air before he set her down.

Now she saw a second man, shorter, also clothed in black. This one stood on the road and was turned away, his gaze in the direction the soldiers had gone. He spoke, his voice reed-thin. 'Wasn't much of a life,' he said, not turning to face her. 'A minor talent, long since dried up of the Gift. Oh, she might have managed one more, but we'll never know, will we?'

The fishergirl stumbled over to Rigga's bag and picked up a candle. She straightened, her eyes suddenly hard, then deliberately spat on to the road.

The shorter man's head snapped towards her. Within the hood it seemed the shadows played alone.

The girl shrank back a step. 'It was a good life,' she whispered. 'She had these candles, you see. Five of them. Five for—'

'Necromancy,' the short man cut in.

The taller man, still at her side, said softly, 'I see them, child. I understand what they mean.'

The other man snorted. 'The witch harboured five frail, weak souls. Nothing grand.' He cocked his head. 'I can hear them now. Calling for her.'

Tears filled the girl's eyes. A wordless anguish seemed to well up from that black stone in her mind. She wiped her cheeks. 'Where did you come from?' she asked abruptly. 'We didn't see you on the road.'

The man beside her half turned to the gravel track. 'On the other side,' he said, a smile in his tone. 'Waiting, just like you.'

The other giggled. 'On the other side indeed.' He faced down the road again and raised his arms.

The girl drew in a sharp breath as darkness descended. A loud, tearing sound filled the air for a second, then the darkness dissipated and the girl's eyes widened.

Seven massive Hounds now sat around the man in the road. The eyes of these beasts glowed yellow, and all were turned in the same direction as the man himself.

She heard him hiss, 'Eager, are we? Then go!'

Silently, the Hounds bolted down the road.

Their master turned and said to the man beside her, 'Something to gnaw on Laseen's mind.' He giggled again.

'Must you complicate things?' the other answered wearily.

The short man stiffened. 'They are within sight of the column.' He cocked his head. From up the road came the scream of horses. He sighed. 'You've reached a decision, Cotillion?'

The other grunted amusedly. 'Using my name, Ammanas, means you've just decided for me. We can hardly leave her here now, can we?'

'Of course we can, old friend. Just not breathing.'

Cotillion looked down on the girl. 'No,' he said quietly, 'she'll do.'

The fishergirl bit her lip. Still clutching Rigga's candle, she took another step back, her wide eyes darting from one man to the other.

'Pity,' Ammanas said.

Cotillion seemed to nod, then he cleared his throat and said, 'It'll take time.'

An amused note entered Ammanas's reply. 'And have we time? True vengeance needs the slow, careful stalking of the victim. Have you forgotten the pain she once delivered us? Laseen's back is against the wall already. She might fall without our help. Where would be the satisfaction in that?'

Cotillion's response was cool and dry. 'You've always underestimated the Empress. Hence our present circumstances ... No.' He gestured at the fishergirl. 'We'll need this one. Laseen's raised the ire of Moon's Spawn, and that's a hornet's nest if ever there was one. The timing is perfect.'

Faintly, above the screaming horses, came the shrieks of men and women, a sound that pierced the girl's heart. Her eyes darted to Rigga's motionless form on the roadside, then back to Ammanas, who now approached her. She thought to run but her legs had weakened to a helpless trembling. He came close and seemed to study her, even though the shadows within his hood remained impenetrable.

'A fishergirl?' he asked, in a kindly tone.

She nodded.

'Have you a name?'

'Enough!' Cotillion growled. 'She's not some mouse under your paw, Ammanas. Besides, I've chosen her and I will choose her name as well.'

Ammanas stepped back. 'Pity,' he said again.

The girl raised imploring hands. 'Please,' she begged Cotillion, 'I've done nothing! My father's a poor man, but he'll pay you all he can. He needs me, and the twine – he's waiting right now!' She felt herself go wet between her

legs and quickly sat down on the ground. 'I've done nothing!' Shame rose through her and she put her hands in her lap. 'Please.'

'I've no choice any more, child,' Cotillion said. 'After all, you know our names.'

'I've never heard them before!' the girl cried.

The man sighed. 'With what's happening up the road right now, well, you'd be questioned. Unpleasantly. There are those who know our names.'

'You see, lass,' Ammanas added, suppressing a giggle, 'we're not supposed to be here. There are names, and then there are *names.'* He swung to Cotillion and said, in a chilling voice, 'Her father must be dealt with. My Hounds?'

'No,' Cotillion said. 'He lives.'

'Then how?'

'I suspect,' Cotillion said, 'greed will suffice, once the slate is wiped clean.' Sarcasm filled his next words. 'I'm sure you can manage the sorcery in that, can't you?'

Ammanas giggled. 'Beware of shadows bearing gifts.'

Cotillion faced the girl again. He lifted his arms out to the sides. The shadows that held his features in darkness now flowed out around his body.

Ammanas spoke, and to the girl his words seemed to come from a great distance. 'She's ideal. The Empress could never track her down, could never even so much as guess.' He raised his voice. 'It's not so bad a thing, lass, to be the pawn of a god.'

'Prod and pull,' the fishergirl said quickly.

Cotillion hesitated at her strange comment, then he shrugged. The shadows whirled out to engulf the girl. With their cold touch her mind fell away, down into darkness. Her last fleeting sensation was of the soft wax of the candle in her right hand, and how it seemed to well up between the fingers of her clenched fist.

The captain shifted in his saddle and glanced at the woman riding beside him. 'We've closed the road on both sides, Adjunct. Moved the local traffic inland. So far, no word's leaked.' He wiped sweat from his brow and winced. The hot woollen cap beneath his helm had rubbed his forehead raw.

'Something wrong, Captain?'

He shook his head, squinting up the road. 'Helmet's loose. Had more hair the last time I wore it.'

The Adjunct to the Empress did not reply.

The mid-morning sun made the road's white, dusty surface almost blinding. The captain felt sweat running down his body, and the mail of his helm's lobster tail kept nipping the hairs on his neck. Already his lower back ached. It had been years since he'd last ridden a horse, and the roll was slow in coming. With every saddle-bounce he felt vertebrae crunch.

It had been a long time since somebody's title had been enough to straighten him up. But this was the Adjunct to the Empress, Laseen's personal servant, an extension of her Imperial will. The last thing the captain wanted was to show his misery to this young, dangerous woman.

Up ahead the road began its long, winding ascent. A salty wind blew from their left, whistling through the newly budding trees lining that side of the road. By mid-afternoon, that wind would breathe hot as a baker's oven, carrying with it the stench of the mudflats. And the sun's heat would bring something else as well. The captain hoped to be back in Kan by then.

He tried not to think about the place they rode towards. Leave that to the Adjunct. In his years of service to the Empire, he'd seen enough to know when to shut everything down inside his skull. This was one of those times.

The Adjunct spoke. 'You've been stationed here long, Captain?'

'Aye,' the man growled.

The woman waited, then asked, 'How long?'

He hesitated. 'Thirteen years, Adjunct.'

'You fought for the Emperor, then,' she said.

'Aye.'

'And survived the purge.'

The captain threw her a look. If she felt his gaze, she gave no indication. Her eyes remained on the road ahead; she rolled easily in the saddle, the scabbarded longsword hitched high under her left arm – ready for mounted battle. Her hair was either cut short or drawn up under her helm. Her figure was lithe enough, the captain mused.

'Finished?' she asked. 'I was asking about the purges commanded by Empress Laseen following her predecessor's untimely death.'

The captain gritted his teeth, ducked his chin to draw up the helm's strap – he hadn't had time to shave and the buckle was chafing. 'Not everyone was killed, Adjunct. The people of Itko Kan aren't exactly excitable. None of those riots and mass executions that hit other parts of the Empire. We all just sat tight and waited.'

'I take it,' the Adjunct said, with a slight smile, 'you're not noble-born, Captain.'

He grunted. 'If I'd been noble-born, I wouldn't have survived, even here in Itko Kan. We both know that. Her orders were specific, and even the droll Kanese didn't dare disobey the Empress.' He scowled. 'No, up through the ranks, Adjunct.'

'Your last engagement?'

'Wickan Plains.'

They rode on in silence for a time, passing the occasional soldier stationed on the road. Off to their left the trees fell away to ragged heather, and the sea beyond showed its white-capped expanse. The Adjunct spoke. 'This area you've contained, how many of your guard have you deployed to patrol it?'

'Eleven hundred,' the captain replied.

Her head turned at this, her cool gaze tightening beneath the rim of her helm.

The captain studied her expression. 'The carnage stretches half a league from the sea, Adjunct, and a quarter-league inland.'

The woman said nothing.

They approached the summit. A score of soldiers had gathered there, and others waited along the slope's rise. All had turned to watch them.

'Prepare yourself, Adjunct.'

The woman studied the faces lining the roadside. She knew these to be hardened men and women, veterans of the siege of Li Heng and the Wickan Wars out on the north plains. But something had been clawed into their eyes that had left them raw and exposed. They looked upon her with a yearning that she found disturbing, as if they hungered for answers. She fought the urge to speak to them as she passed, to offer whatever comforting words she could. Such gifts were not hers to give, however, nor had they ever been. In this she was much the same as the Empress.

From beyond the summit she heard the cries of gulls and crows, a sound that rose into a high-pitched roar as they reached the rise. Ignoring the soldiers on either side, the Adjunct moved her horse forward. The captain followed. They came to the crest and looked down. The road dipped here for perhaps a fifth of a league, climbing again at the far end to a promontory.

Thousands of gulls and crows covered the ground, spilling over into the ditches and among the low, rough heather and gorse. Beneath this churning sea of black and white the ground was a uniform red. Here and there rose the ribbed humps of horses, and from among the squalling birds came the glint of iron.

The captain reached up and unstrapped his helm. He lifted it slowly from his head, then set it down over his saddle horn. 'Adjunct...'

'I am named Lorn,' the woman said softly.

'One hundred and seventy-five men and women. Two hundred and ten horses. The Nineteenth Regiment of the Itko Kanese Eighth Cavalry.' The captain's throat tightened briefly. He looked at Lorn. 'Dead.' His horse shied under him as it caught an updraught. He closed savagely on the reins and the animal stilled, nostrils wide and ears back, muscles trembling under him. The Adjunct's stallion made no move. 'All had their weapons bared. All fought whatever enemy attacked them. But the dead are all ours.'

'You've checked the beach below?' Lorn asked, still staring down on the road.

'No signs of a landing,' the captain replied. 'No tracks anywhere, neither seaward nor inland. There are more dead than these, Adjunct. Farmers, peasants, fisherfolk, travellers on the road. All of them torn apart, limbs scattered – children, livestock, dogs.' He stopped abruptly and turned away. 'Over four hundred dead,' he grated. 'We're not certain of the exact count.'

'Of course,' Lorn said, her tone devoid of feeling. 'No witnesses?'

'None.'

A man was riding towards them on the road below, leaning close to his horse's ear as he talked the frightened animal through the carnage. Birds rose in shrieking complaint in front of him, settling again once he had passed.

'Who is that?' the Adjunct asked.

The captain grunted. 'Lieutenant Ganoes Paran. He's new to my command. From Unta.'

Lorn's eyes narrowed on the young man. He'd reached the edge of the depression, stopping to relay orders to the work crews. He leaned back in his saddle then and glanced in their direction. 'Paran. From House Paran?'

'Aye, gold in his veins and all that.'

'Call him up here.'

The captain gestured and the lieutenant kicked his mount's flanks. Moments later he reined in beside the captain and saluted.

The man and his horse were covered from head to toe in blood and bits of flesh. Flies and wasps buzzed hungrily around them. Lorn saw in Lieutenant Paran's face none of the youth that rightly belonged there. For all that, it was an easy face to rest eyes upon.

'You checked the other side, Lieutenant?' the captain asked.

Paran nodded. 'Yes, sir. There's a small fishing settlement down from the promontory. A dozen or so huts. Bodies in all but two. Most of the barques look to be in, though there's one empty mooring pole.'

Lorn cut in. 'Lieutenant, describe the empty huts.'

He batted at a threatening wasp before answering. 'One was at the top of the strand, just off the trail from the road. We think it belonged to an old woman we found dead on the road, about half a league south of here.'

'Why?'

'Adjunct, the hut's contents were that of an old woman. Also, she seemed in the habit of burning candles. Tallow candles, in fact. The old woman on the road had a sack full of turnips and a handful of tallow candles. Tallow's expensive here, Adjunct.'

Lorn asked, 'How many times have you ridden through this battlefield, Lieutenant?'

'Enough to be getting used to it, Adjunct.' He grimaced.

'And the second empty hut?'

'A man and a girl, we think. The hut's close to the tidemark, opposite the empty mooring pole.'

'No sign of them?'

'None, Adjunct. Of course, we're still finding bodies, along the road, out in the fields.'

'But not on the beach.'

'No.'

The Adjunct frowned, aware that both men were watching her. 'Captain, what kind of weapons killed your soldiers?'

The captain hesitated, then turned a glare on the lieutenant. 'You've been crawling around down there, Paran, let's hear your opinion.'

Paran's answering smile was tight. 'Yes, sir. Natural weapons.'

The captain felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. He'd hoped he'd been wrong.

'What do you mean,' Lorn asked, 'natural weapons?'

'Teeth, mostly. Very big, very sharp ones.'

The captain cleared his throat, then said, 'There haven't been wolves in Itko Kan for a hundred years. In any case, no carcasses around—'

'If it was wolves,' Paran said, turning to eye the basin, 'they were as big as mules. No tracks, Adjunct. Not even a tuft of hair.'

'Not wolves, then,' Lorn said.

Paran shrugged.

The Adjunct drew a deep breath, held it, then let it out in a slow sigh. 'I want to see this fishing village.'

The captain made ready to don his helmet, but the Adjunct shook her head. 'Lieutenant Paran will suffice, Captain. I suggest you take personal command of your guard in the meantime. The dead must be removed as quickly as possible. All evidence of the massacre is to be erased.'

'Understood, Adjunct,' the captain said, hoping he'd kept the relief out of his voice.

Lorn turned to the young noble. 'Well, Lieutenant?'

He nodded and clucked his horse into motion.

It was when the birds scattered from their path that the Adjunct found herself envying the captain. Before her the roused carrion-eaters exposed a carpet of armour, broken bones and meat. The air was hot, turgid and cloying. She saw soldiers, still helmed, their heads crushed by what must have been huge, terribly powerful jaws. She saw torn mail, crumpled shields, and limbs that had been ripped from bodies. Lorn managed only a few moments of careful examination of the scene around them before she fixed her gaze on the promontory ahead, unable to encompass the magnitude of the slaughter. Her stallion, bred of the finest lines of Seven Cities stock, a warhorse trained in the blood for generations, had lost its proud, unyielding strut, and now picked its way carefully along the road.

Lorn realized she needed a distraction, and sought it in conversation. 'Lieutenant, have you received your commission yet?'

'No, Adjunct. I expect to be stationed in the capital.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'Indeed. And how will you manage that?'

Paran squinted ahead, a tight smile on his lips. 'It will be arranged.'

'I see.' Lorn fell silent. 'The nobles have refrained from seeking military commissions, kept their heads low for a long time, haven't they?'

'Since the first days of the Empire. The Emperor held no love for us. Whereas Empress Laseen's concerns seem to lie elsewhere.'

Lorn eyed the young man. 'I see you like taking risks, Lieutenant,' she said. 'Unless your presumption extends to goading the Adjunct to the Empress. Are you that confident of your blood's invincibility?'

'Since when is speaking the truth presumptuous?'

'You *are* young, aren't you?'

This seemed to sting Paran. A flush rose in his smooth-shaven cheeks. 'Adjunct, for the past seven hours I have been knee-deep in torn flesh and spilled blood. I've been fighting crows and gulls for bodies – do you know what these birds are doing here? Precisely? They're tearing off strips of meat and fighting over them; they're getting fat on eyeballs and tongues,

livers and hearts. In their frantic greed they fling the meat around ...' He paused, visibly regaining control over himself as he straightened in his saddle. 'I'm not young any more, Adjunct. As for presumption, I honestly couldn't care less. Truth can't be danced around, not out here, not now, not ever again.'

They reached the far slope. Off to the left a narrow track led down towards the sea. Paran gestured to it, then angled his horse forward.

Lorn followed, her thoughtful expression holding on the lieutenant's broad back, before she turned her attention to the route they took. The path was narrow, skirting the promontory's bluff. Off to the left the trail's edge dropped away to rocks sixty feet below. The tide was out, the waves breaking on a reef a few hundred yards offshore. Pools filled the black bedrock's cracks and basins, dully reflecting an overcast sky.

They came to a bend, and beyond and below stretched a crescent-shaped beach. Above it, at the promontory's foot, lay a broad, grassy shelf on which squatted a dozen huts.

The Adjunct swung her gaze seaward. The barques rested on their low flanks beside their mooring poles. The air above the beach and the tidal flat was empty – not a bird in sight.

She halted her mount. A moment later Paran glanced back at her then did the same. He watched her as she removed her helmet and shook out her long, auburn hair. It was wet and stringy with sweat. The lieutenant rode back to her side, a questioning look in his eyes.

'Lieutenant Paran, your words were well spoken.' She breathed in the salty air, then met his gaze. 'You won't be stationed in Unta, I'm afraid. You will be taking your orders from me as a commissioned officer on my staff.'

His eyes slowly narrowed. 'What happened to those soldiers, Adjunct?'

She didn't answer immediately, leaning back on her saddle and scanning the distant sea. 'Someone's been here,' she said. 'A sorcerer of great power. Something's happened, and we're being diverted from discovering it.'

Paran's mouth dropped open. 'Killing four hundred people was a diversion?'

'If that man and his daughter had been out fishing, they'd have come in with the tide.'

'But—'

'You won't find their bodies, Lieutenant.'

Paran was puzzled. 'Now what?'

She glanced at him, then swung her horse around. 'We go back.'

'That's it?' He stared after her as she directed her mount back up the trail, then rode to catch up. 'Wait a minute, Adjunct,' he said, as he came alongside.

She gave him a warning look.

Paran shook his head. 'No. If I'm now on your staff, I have to know more about what's going on.'

She placed her helmet back on and cinched tight the strap under her chin. Her long hair dangled in tattered ropes down over her Imperial cape. 'Very well. As you know, Lieutenant, I'm no mage—'

'No,' Paran cut in, with a cold grin, 'you just hunt them down and kill them.'

'Don't interrupt me again. As I was saying, I am anathema to sorcery. That means, Lieutenant, that, even though I'm not a practitioner, I have a relationship with magic. Of sorts. We know each other, if you will. I know the patterns of sorcery, and I know the patterns of the minds that use it. We were meant to conclude that the slaughter was thorough, and random. It was neither. There's a path here, and we have to find it.'

Slowly Paran nodded.

'Your first task, Lieutenant, is to ride to the market town – what's its name again?'

'Gerrom.'

'Yes, Gerrom. They'll know this fishing village, since that's where the catch is sold. Ask around, find out which fisher family consisted of a father and daughter. Get me their names, and their descriptions. Use the militia if the locals are recalcitrant.'

'They won't be,' Paran said. 'The Kanese are co-operative folk.'

They reached the top of the trail and stopped at the road. Below, wagons rocked among the bodies, the oxen braying and stamping their blood-soaked hoofs. Soldiers shouted in the press, while overhead wheeled thousands of birds. The scene stank of panic. At the far end stood the captain, his helmet hanging from its strap in one hand.

The Adjunct stared down on the scene with hard eyes. 'For their sake,' she said, 'I hope you're right, Lieutenant.'

As he watched the two riders approach, something told the captain that his days of ease in Itko Kan were numbered. His helmet felt heavy in his hand. He eyed Paran. That thin-blooded bastard had it made. A *hundred strings pulling him every step of the way* to *some cushy posting in some peaceful city.*

He saw Lorn studying him as they came to the crest. 'Captain, I have a request for you.'

The captain grunted. *Request, hell. The Empress has to check her slippers every morning to make sure this one isn't already in them.* 'Of course, Adjunct.'

The woman dismounted, as did Paran. The lieutenant's expression was impassive. Was that arrogance, or had the Adjunct given him something to think about?

'Captain,' Lorn began, 'I understand there's a recruiting drive under way in Kan. Do you pull in people from outside the city?'

'To join? Sure, more of them than anyone else. City folk got too much to give up. Besides, they get the bad news first. Most of the peasants don't know everything's gone to hell on Genabackis. A lot of them figure city folk whine too much anyway. May I ask why?'

'You may.' Lorn turned to watch the soldiers cleaning up the road. 'I need a list of recent recruits. Within the last two days. Forget the ones born in the city, just the outlying ones. And only the women and/or old men.'

The captain grunted again. 'Should be a short list, Adjunct.'

'I hope so, Captain.'

'You figured out what's behind all this?'

Still following the activity on the road below, Lorn said, 'No idea.'

Yes, the captain thought, and I'm the Emperor reincarnated. 'Too bad,' he muttered.

'Oh.' The Adjunct faced him. 'Lieutenant Paran is now on my staff. I trust you'll make the necessary adjustments.'

'As you wish, Adjunct. I love paperwork.'

That earned him a slight smile. Then it was gone. 'Lieutenant Paran will be leaving now.'

The captain looked at the young noble and smiled, letting the smile say everything. Working for the Adjunct was like being the worm on the hook. The Adjunct was the hook, and at the other end of the line was the Empress. Let him squirm.

A sour expression flitted across Paran's face. 'Yes, Adjunct.' He climbed back into the saddle, saluted, then rode off down the road.

The captain watched him leave, then said, 'Anything else, Adjunct?'

'Yes.'

Her tone brought him around.

'I would like to hear a soldier's opinion of the nobility's present inroads on the Imperial command structure.'

The captain stared hard at her. 'It ain't pretty, Adjunct.'

'Go on.'

The captain talked.

It was the eighth day of recruiting and Staff Sergeant Aragan sat bleary-eyed behind his desk as yet another whelp was prodded forward by the corporal. They'd had some luck here in Kan. Fishing's best in the backwaters, Kan's Fist had said. All they get around here is stories. Stories don't make you bleed. Stories don't make you go hungry, don't give you sore feet. When you're young and smelling of pigshit and convinced there ain't a weapon in all the damn world that's going to hurt you, all stories do is make you want to be part of them.

The old woman was right. As usual. These people had been under the boot so long they actually liked it. Well, Aragan thought, the education begins here.

It had been a bad day, with the local captain roaring off with three companies and leaving not one solid rumour in their wake about what was going on. And if that wasn't bad enough, Laseen's Adjunct arrived from Unta not ten minutes later, using one of those eerie magical Warrens to get here. Though he'd never seen her, just her name on the hot, dry wind was enough to give him the shakes. Mage killer, the scorpion in the Imperial pocket.

Aragan scowled down at the writing tablet and waited until the corporal cleared his throat. Then he looked up.

The recruit standing before him took the staff sergeant aback. He opened his mouth, on his tongue a lashing tirade designed to send the young ones scampering. A second later he shut it again, the words unspoken. Kan's Fist had made her instructions abundantly clear: if they had two arms, two legs

and a head, take them. The Genabackis campaign was a mess. Fresh bodies were needed.

He grinned at the girl. She matched the Fist's description perfectly. Still. 'All right, lass, you understand you're in line to join the Malazan Marines, right?'

The girl nodded, her gaze steady and cool and fixed on Aragan.

The recruiter's expression tightened. *Damn, she can't be more than twelve or thirteen. If this was my daughter ...*

What's got her eyes looking so bloody old? The last time he'd seen anything like them had been outside Mott Forest, on Genabackis – he'd been marching through farmland hit by five years' drought and a war twice as long. Those old eyes were brought by hunger, or death. He scowled. 'What's your name, girl?'

'Am I in, then?' she asked quietly.

Aragan nodded, a sudden headache pounding against the inside of his skull. 'You'll get your assignment in a week's time, unless you got a preference.'

'Genabackan campaign,' the girl answered immediately. 'Under the command of High Fist Dujek Onearm. Onearm's Host.'

Aragan blinked. 'I'll make a note,' he said softly. 'Your name, soldier?'

'Sorry. My name is Sorry.'

Aragan jotted the name down on his tablet. 'Dismissed, soldier. The corporal will tell you where to go.' He looked up as she was near the door. 'And wash all that mud off your feet.' Aragan continued writing for a moment, then stopped. It hadn't rained in weeks. And the mud around here was half-way between green and grey, not dark red. He tossed down the stylus and massaged his temples. *Well, at least the headache's fading.*

Gerrom was a league and a half inland along the Old Kan Road, a pre-Empire thoroughfare rarely used since the Imperial raised coast road had been constructed. The traffic on it these days was mostly on foot, local farmers and fishers with their goods. Of them only unravelled and torn bundles of clothing, broken baskets and trampled vegetables littering the track remained to give evidence of their passage. A lame mule, the last sentinel overseeing the refuse of an exodus, stood dumbly nearby, ankle-deep in a rice paddy. It spared Paran a single forlorn glance as he rode past.

The detritus looked to be no more than a day old, the fruits and green-leaved vegetables only now beginning to rot in the afternoon heat.

His horse carrying him at a slow walk, Paran watched as the first outbuildings of the small trader town came into view through the dusty haze. No one moved between the shabby mudbrick houses; no dogs came out to challenge him, and the only cart in sight leaned on a single wheel. To add to the uncanny scene, the air was still, empty of birdsong. Paran loosened the sword in its scabbard.

As he neared the outbuildings he halted his mount. The exodus had been swift, a panicked flight. Yet he saw no bodies, no signs of violence beyond the haste evident in those leaving. He drew a deep breath, slowly released it, then clicked his horse forward. The main street was in effect the town's only street, leading at its far end to a T intersection marked by a single two-storey stone building: the Imperial Constabulary. Its tin-backed shutters were closed, its heavy banded door shut. As he approached Paran held his eyes on the building.

He dismounted before it, tying his mare to the hitching rail then looking back up the street. No movement. Unsheathing his blade, Paran swung back to the Constabulary door.

A soft, steady sound from within stopped him, too low to be heard from any distance but now, as he stood before the huge door, he could hear a liquid murmuring that raised the hairs on his neck. Paran reached out with his sword and set its point under the latch. He lifted the iron handle upward until it disengaged, then pushed open the door.

Movement rippled in the gloom within, a flap and soft thumping of air carrying to Paran the redolent stench of putri-fying flesh. Breathing hard and with a mouth dry as old cotton, he waited for his eyes to adjust.

He stared into the Constabulary's outer room, and it was a mass of movement, a chilling soft sussuration of throats giving voice. The chamber was filled with black pigeons cooing in icy calm. Uniformed human shapes lay in their midst, stretched haphazardly across the floor amid droppings and drifting black down. Sweat and death clung to the air thick as gauze.

He took a step inside. The pigeons rustled but otherwise ignored him. None made for the open doorway.

Swollen faces with coin-dull eyes stared up from the shadows; the faces were blue, as of men suffocated. Paran looked down at one of the soldiers. 'Not a healthy thing,' he muttered, 'wearing these uniforms these days.'

A *conjuring of birds to keep mocking vigil. Dark humour's not to my liking any more, 1 think.* He shook himself, walked across the room. The pigeons tracked away from his boots, clucking. The door to the captain's office was ajar. Musty light bled through the shuttered windows' uneven joins. Sheathing his sword, Paran entered the office. The captain still sat in his chair, his face bloated and bruised in shades of blue, green and grey.

Paran swept damp feathers from the desktop, rummaged through the scroll work. The papyrus sheets fell apart under his touch, the leaves rotten and oily between his fingers.

A *thorough eliminating of the trail.*

He turned away, walked swiftly back through the outer room until he stepped into the warm light. He closed the Constabulary door as, no doubt, the villagers had.

The dark bloom of sorcery was a stain few cared to examine too closely. It had a way of spreading.

Paran untethered his mare, climbed into the saddle and rode from the abandoned town. He did not look back.

The sun sat heavy and bloated amid a smear of crimson cloud on the horizon. Paran fought to keep his eyes open. It had been a long day. A *horrific day.* The land around him, once familiar and safe, had become something else, a place stirred with the dark currents of sorcery. He was not looking forward to a night camped in the open.

His mount plodded onward, head down, as dusk slowly enveloped them. Pulled by the weary chains of his thoughts, Paran tried to make sense of what had happened since morning.

Snatched out from the shadow of that sour-faced, laconic captain and the garrison at Kan, the lieutenant had seen his prospects begin a quick rise. Aide to the Adjunct was an advancement in his career he could not have even imagined a week ago. Despite the profession he had chosen, his father and his sisters were bound to be impressed, perhaps even awed, by his achievement. Like so many other noble-born sons and daughters, he'd long since set his sights on the Imperial military, hungry for prestige and bored with the complacent, static attitudes of the noble class in general. Paran wanted something more challenging than co-ordinating shipments of wine, or overseeing the breeding of horses.

Nor was he among the first to enlist, thus easing the way for entrance into officer training and selective postings. It had just been ill-luck that saw him sent to Kan, where a veteran garrison had been licking its wounds for nigh on six years. There'd been little respect for an untested lieutenant, and even less for a noble-born.

Paran suspected that that had changed since the slaughter on the road. He'd handled it better than many of those veterans, helped in no small part by the superb breeding of his horse. More, to prove to them all his cool, detached professionalism, he'd volunteered to lead the inspection detail.

He'd done well, although the detail had proved ... difficult. He'd heard screaming while crawling around among the bodies, coming from somewhere inside his own head. His eyes had fixed on details, oddities – the peculiar twist of this body, the inexplicable smile on that dead soldier's

face – but what had proved hardest was what had been done to the horses. Crusted foam-filled nostrils and mouths – the signs of terror – and the wounds were terrible, huge and devastating. Bile and faeces stained the once-proud mounts, and over everything was a glittering carpet of blood and slivers of red flesh. He had nearly wept for those horses.

He shifted uneasily on the saddle, feeling a clamminess come to his hands where they rested on the ornate horn. He'd held on to his confidence through the whole episode; yet now, as his thoughts returned to that horrid scene, it was as if something that had always been solid in his mind now stuttered, shied, threatening his balance; the faint contempt he'd shown for those veterans in his troop, kneeling helpless on the roadside racked by dry-heaves, returned to him now with a ghoulish cast. And the echo that came from the Constabulary at Gerrom, arriving like a late blow to his already bruised and battered soul, rose once again to pluck at the defensive numbness still holding him in check.

Paran straightened with an effort. He'd told the Adjunct his youth was gone. He'd told her other things as well, fearless, uncaring, lacking all the caution his father had instilled in him when it came to the many faces of the Empire.

From a great distance in his mind came old, old words: *live quietly.* He'd rejected that notion then; he rejected it still. The Adjunct, however, had noticed him. He wondered now, for the first time, if he was right to feel pride. That hard-bitten commander of so many years ago, on the walls of Mock's Hold, would have spat at Paran's feet, with contempt, had he now stood before him. The boy was a boy no longer, but a man. *Should've heeded my words, son. Now look at you.*

His mare pulled up suddenly, hoofs thumping confusedly on the rutted road. Paran reached for his weapon as he looked uneasily around in the gloom. The track ran through rice paddies, the nearest shacks of the peasants on a parallel ridge a hundred paces from the road. Yet a figure now blocked the road.

A cold breath swirled lazily past, pinning back the mare's ears and widening her nostrils as she flinched.

The figure – a man by his height – was swathed in shades of green: cloaked, hooded, wearing a faded tunic and linen leggings above green-dyed leather boots. A single long-knife, the weapon of choice among Seven Cities warriors, was slung through a thin belt. The man's hands, faintly grey in the afternoon light, glittered with ring's, rings on every finger, above and below the knuckles. He raised one now, holding up a clay jug.

'Thirsty, Lieutenant?' The man's voice was soft, the tone strangely melodic.

'Have I business with you?' Paran asked, his hand remaining on the grip of his longsword.

The man smiled, pulling back his hood. His face was long, the skin a lighter shade of grey, the eyes dark and strangely angled. He looked to be in his early thirties, though his hair was white. 'The Adjunct asked of me a favour,' he said. 'She grows impatient for your report. I am to escort you ... with haste.' He shook the jug. 'But first, a repast. I have a veritable feast secreted in my pockets – far better fare than a browbeaten Kanese village can offer. Join me, here on the roadside. We can amuse ourselves in conversation and idle watching of peasants toiling endlessly. I am named Topper.'

'I know that name,' Paran said.

'Well, you should,' Topper replied. 'I am he, alas. The blood of a Tiste Andii races in my veins, seeking escape, no doubt, from its more common human stream. Mine was the hand that took the life of Unta's royal line, king, queen, sons and daughters.'

'And cousins, second cousins, third—'

'Expunging all hope, indeed. Such was my duty as a Claw of unsurpassed skill. But you have failed in answering my question.'

'Which was?'

'Thirsty?'

Scowling, Paran dismounted. 'I thought you said the Adjunct wished for haste.'

'Hasten we shall, Lieutenant, once we've filled our bellies, and conversed in civil fashion.'

'Your reputation puts civility far down your list of skills, Claw.'

'It's a most cherished trait of mine that sees far too little opportunity for exercise these fell days, Lieutenant. Surely you'd grant me some of your precious time, since I'm to be your escort?'

'Whatever arrangement you made with the Adjunct is between you and her,' Paran said, approaching. 'I owe you nothing, Topper. Except enmity.'

The Claw squatted, removing wrapped packages from his pockets, followed by two crystal goblets. He uncorked the jug. 'Ancient wounds. I was led to understand you've taken a different path, leaving behind the dull, jostling ranks of the nobility' He poured, filling the goblets with amber-coloured wine. 'You are now one with the body of Empire, Lieutenant. It commands you. You respond unquestioningly to its will. You are a small part of a muscle in that body. No more. No less. The time for old grudges is long past. So,' he set down the jug and handed Paran a goblet, 'we now salute new beginnings, Ganoes Paran, lieutenant and aide to Adjunct Lorn.'

Scowling, Paran accepted the goblet.

The two drank.

Topper smiled, producing a silk handkerchief to dab against his lips. 'There now, that wasn't so difficult, was it? May I call you by your chosen name?'

'Paran will do. And you? What title does the commander of the Claw hold?'

Topper smiled again. 'Laseen still commands the Claw. I assist her. In this way I too am an aide of sorts. You may call me by my chosen name, of course. I'm not one for maintaining formalities beyond a reasonable point in an acquaintance.'

Paran sat down on the muddy road. 'And we've passed that point?'

'Indeed.'

'How do you decide?'

'Ah, well.' Topper began unwrapping his packages, revealing cheese, fistbread, fruit and berries. 'I make acquaintances in one of two ways. You've seen the second of those.'

'And the first?'

'No time for proper introductions in those instances, alas.'

Wearily Paran unstrapped and removed his helm. 'Do you wish to hear what I found in Gerrom?' he asked, running a hand through his black hair.

Topper shrugged. 'If you've the need.'

'Perhaps I'd better await my audience with the Adjunct.'

The Claw smiled. 'You have begun to learn, Paran. Never be too easy with the knowledge you possess. Words are like coin – it pays to hoard.'

'Until you die on a bed of gold,' Paran said.

'Hungry? I hate eating alone.'

Paran accepted a chunk of fistbread. 'So, was the Adjunct truly impatient, or are you here for other reasons?'

With a smile, the Claw rose. 'Alas, genteel conversation is done. Our way opens.' He faced the road.

Paran turned to see a curtain in the air tear open on the road, spilling dull yellow light. A *Warren, the secret paths of sorcery.* 'Hood's Breath.' He sighed, fighting off a sudden chill. Within he could see a greyish pathway, humped on either side by low mounded walls and vaulted overhead by impenetrable ochre-hued mist. The air swept past into the portal like a drawn breath, revealing the pathway to be of ash as invisible currents stirred and raised spinning dust-devils.

'You will have to get used to this,' Topper said.

Paran collected his mare's reins and slung his helm on the saddlehorn. 'Lead on,' he said.

The Claw cast him a quick appraising glance, then strode into the Warren.

Paran followed. The portalway closed behind them, in its place a continuation of the path. Itko Kan had vanished, and with it all signs of life. The world they had entered was barren, deathly. The banked mounds lining the trail proved to be more ash. The air was gritty, tasting of metal.

'Welcome to the Imperial Warren,' Topper said, with a hint of mockery.

'Pleasant.'

'Carved by force out of... what was here before. Has such an effort ever been achieved before? Only the gods can say.'

They began walking.

'I take it, then,' Paran said, 'that no god claims this Warren. By this, you cheat the tolls, the gatekeepers, the guardians on unseen bridges, and all the others said to dwell in the Warrens in service to their immortal masters.'

Topper grunted. 'You imagine the Warrens as crowded as that? Well, the beliefs of the ignorant are ever entertaining. You shall be good company on this short journey, I think.'

Paran fell silent. The horizons beyond the banked heaps of ash were close, a vague blending of ochre sky and grey-black ground. Sweat trickled under his mail hauberk. His mare snorted heavily.

'In case you were wondering,' Topper said, after a time, 'the Adjunct is now in Unta. We will use this Warren to cross the distance – three hundred leagues in only a few short hours. Some think the Empire has grown too large, some even think their remote provinces are beyond the Empress Laseen's reach. As you have just learned, Paran, such beliefs are held by fools.'

The mare snorted again.

'I've shamed you into silence, then? I do apologize, Lieutenant, for mocking your ignorance—'

'It's a risk you'll have to live with,' Paran said.

The next thousand paces of silence belonged to Topper.

No shifting of light marked the passing of hours. A number of times they came upon places where the ash embankments had been disturbed, as if by the passage of something large, shambling; and wide, slithery trails led off into the gloom. In one such place they found a dark encrusted stain and the scatter of chain links like coins in the dust. Topper examined the scene closely while Paran watched.

Hardly the secure road he'd have me believe. There're strangers here, and they're not friendly.

He was not surprised to find Topper increasing their pace thereafter. A short while later they came to a stone archway. It had been recently constructed, and Paran recognized the basalt as Untan, from the Imperial quarries outside the capital. The walls of his family's estate were of the same grey-black glittering stone. At the centre of the arch, high over their heads, was carved a taloned hand holding a crystal globe: the Malazan Imperial sigil.

Beyond the arch was darkness.

Paran cleared his throat. 'We have arrived?'

Topper spun to him. 'You answer civility with arrogance, Lieutenant. You'd do well to shed the noble hauteur.'

Smiling, Paran gestured. 'Lead on, escort.'

In a whirl of cloak Topper stepped through the arch and vanished.

The mare bucked as Paran pulled her closer to the arch, head tossing. He tried to soothe her but it was no use. Finally, he climbed into the saddle and

gathered up the reins. He straightened the horse, then drove hard his spurs into her flanks. She bolted, leaped into the void.

Light and colours exploded outward, engulfing them. The mare's hoofs landed with a crunching thump, scattering something that might be gravel in all directions. Paran halted his horse, blinking as he took in the scene around them. A vast chamber, its ceiling glittering with beaten gold, its walls lined with tapestries, and a score of armoured guards closing in on all sides.

Alarmed, the mare sidestepped to send Topper sprawling. A hoof lashed out after him, missing by a handspan. More gravel crunched – only it was not gravel, Paran saw, but mosaic stones. Topper rolled to his feet with a curse, his eyes flashing as he glared at the lieutenant.

The guardsmen seemed to respond to some unspoken order, slowly withdrawing to their positions along the walls. Paran swung his attention from Topper. Before him was a raised dais surmounted by a throne of twisted bone. In the throne sat the Empress.

Silence fell in the chamber except for the crunch of semiprecious gems beneath the mare's hoofs. Grimacing, Paran dismounted, warily eyeing the woman seated on the throne.

Laseen had changed little since the only other time he'd been this close to her; plain and unadorned, her hair short and fair above the blue tint of her unmemorable features. Her brown eyes regarded him narrowly.

Paran adjusted his sword-belt, clasped his hands and bowed from the waist. 'Empress.'

'I see,' Laseen drawled, 'that you did not heed the commander's advice of seven years ago.'

He blinked in surprise.

She continued, 'Of course, he did not heed the advice given him, either. I wonder what god tossed you two together on that parapet – I would do service to acknowledge its sense of humour. Did you imagine the Imperial Arch would exit in the stables, Lieutenant?'

'My horse was reluctant to make the passage, Empress.'

'With good reason.'

Paran smiled. 'Unlike me, she's of a breed known for its intelligence. Please accept my humblest apologies.'

'Topper will see you to the Adjunct.' She gestured, and a guardsman came forward to collect the mare's reins.

Paran bowed again then faced the Claw with a smile.

Topper led him to a side door.

'You fool!' he snapped, as the door was closed soundly behind them. He strode quickly down the narrow hallway. Paran made no effort to keep pace, forcing the Claw to wait at the far end where a set of stairs wound upward. Topper's expression was dark with fury. 'What was that about a parapet? You've met her before – when?'

'Since she declined to explain I can only follow her example,' Paran said. He eyed the saddle-backed stairs. 'This would be the West Tower, then. The Tower of Dust—'

'To the top floor. The Adjunct awaits you in her chambers – there's no other doors so you won't get lost, just keep on until you reach the top.'

Paran nodded and began climbing.

The door to the tower's top room was ajar. Paran rapped a knuckle against it and stepped inside. The Adjunct was seated at a bench at the far end, her back to a wide window. Its shutters were thrown open, revealing the red glint of sunrise. She was getting dressed. Paran halted, embarrassed.

'I'm not one for modesty,' the Adjunct said. 'Enter and close the door behind you.'

Paran did as he was bidden. He looked around. Faded tapestries lined the walls. Ragged furs covered the stone tiles of the floor. The furniture – what little there was – was old, Napan in style and thus artless.

The Adjunct rose to shrug into her leather armour. Her hair shimmered in the red light. 'You look exhausted, Lieutenant. Please, sit.'

He looked around, found a chair and slumped gratefully into it. 'The trail's been thoroughly obscured, Adjunct. The only people left in Gerrom aren't likely to talk.'

She fastened the last of the clasps. 'Unless I were to send a necromancer.'

He grunted. 'Tales of pigeons – I think the possibility was foreseen.'

She regarded him with a raised brow.

'Pardon, Adjunct. It seems that death's heralds were ... birds.'

'And were we to glance through the eyes of the dead soldiers, we would see little else. Pigeons, you said?'

He nodded.

'Curious.' She fell silent.

He watched her for a moment longer. 'Was I bait, Adjunct?'

'No.'

'And Topper's timely arrival?'

'Convenience.'

He fell silent. When he closed his eyes his head spun. He'd not realized how weary he'd become. It was a moment before he understood that she was speaking to him. He shook himself, straightened.

The Adjunct stood before him. 'Sleep later, not now, Lieutenant. I was informing you of your future. It would be well if you paid attention. You completed your task as instructed. Indeed, you have proved yourself highly ... resilient. To all outward appearances, I am done with you, Lieutenant. You will be returned to the Officer Corps here in Unta. What will follow will be a number of postings, completing your official training. As for your time in Itko Kan, nothing unusual occurred there, do you understand me?'

'Yes.'

'Good.'

'And what of what really happened there, Adjunct? Do we abandon pursuit? Do we resign ourselves to never knowing exactly what happened, or why? Or is it simply me who is to be abandoned?'

'Lieutenant, this is a trail we must not follow too closely, but follow it we shall, and you will be central to the effort. I have assumed – perhaps in error – that you would wish to see it through, to be witness when the time for vengeance finally arrives. Was I wrong? Perhaps you've seen enough and seek only a return to normality.'

He closed his eyes. 'Adjunct, I would be there when the time came.'

She was silent and he knew without opening his eyes that she was studying him, gauging his worth. He was beyond unease and beyond caring. He'd stated his desire; the decision was hers.

'We proceed slowly. Your reassignment will take effect in a few days' time. In the meanwhile, go home to your father's estate. Get some rest.'

He opened his eyes and rose to his feet. As he reached the doorway she spoke again. 'Lieutenant, I trust you won't repeat the scene in the Hall of the Throne.'

'I doubt I'd earn as many laughs the second time around, Adjunct.'

As he reached the stairs he heard what might have been a cough from the room behind him. It was hard to imagine that it could have been anything else.

As he led his horse through the streets of Unta he felt numb inside. The familiar sights, the teeming, interminable crowds, the voices and clash of languages all struck Paran as something strange, something altered, not before his eyes but in that unknowable place between his eyes and his thoughts. The change was his alone, and it made him feel shorn, outcast.

Yet the place was the same: the scenes before him were as they always had been and even in watching it pass by all around him, nothing had

changed. It was the gift of noble blood that kept the world at a distance, to be observed from a position unsullied, unjostled by the commonry. *Gift ... and curse.*

Now, however, Paran walked among them without the family guards. The power of blood was gone, and all he possessed by way of armour was the uniform he now wore. Not a craftsman, not a hawker, not a merchant, but a soldier. A weapon of the Empire, and the Empire had those in the tens of thousands.

He passed through Toll Ramp Gate and made his way along Marble Slope Road, where the first merchant estates appeared, pushed back from the cobbled street, half hidden by courtyard walls. The foliage of gardens joined their lively colours with brightly painted walls; the crowds diminished and private guards were visible outside arching gates. The sweltering air lost its reek of sewage and rotting food, slipping cooler across unseen fountains and carrying into the avenue the fragrance of blossoms.

Smells of childhood.

The estates spread out as he led his horse deeper into the Noble District. Breathing-space purchased by history and ancient coin. The Empire seemed to melt away, a distant, mundane concern. Here, families traced their lines back seven centuries to those tribal horsemen who had first come to this land from the east. In blood and fire, as was always the way, they had conquered and subdued the cousins of the Kanese who'd built villages along this coast. From warrior horsemen to horsebreeders to merchants of wine, beer and cloth. An ancient nobility of the blade, now a nobility of hoarded gold, trade agreements, subtle manoeuvrings and hidden corruptions in gilded rooms and oil-lit corridors.

Paran had imagined himself acquiring trappings that closed a circle, a return to the blade from which his family had emerged, strong and savage, all those centuries ago. For his choice, his father had condemned him.

He came to a familiar postern, a single high door along one side wall and facing an alley that in another part of the city would be a wide street. There was no guard here, just a thin bell-chain, which he pulled twice.

Alone in the alley, Paran waited.

A bar clanked on the other side, a voice growled a curse as the door swung back on protesting hinges.

Paran found himself staring down at an unfamiliar face. The man was old, scarred and wearing much-mended chain-mail that ended raggedly around his knees. His pot-helm was uneven with hammered-out dents, yet polished bright.

The man eyed Paran up and down with watery grey eyes, then grunted, 'The tapestry lives.'

'Excuse me?'

The guardsman swung the door wide. 'Older now, of course, but it's all the same by the lines. Good artist, to capture the way of standing, the expression and all. Welcome home, Ganoes.'

Paran led his horse through the narrow doorway. The path was between two outbuildings of the estate, showing sky overhead.

'I don't know you, soldier,' Paran said. 'But it seems my portrait has been well studied by the guards. Is it now a throw-rug in your barracks?'

'Something like that.'

'What is your name?'

'Garnet,' the guard answered, as he followed behind the horse after shutting and locking the door. 'In service to your father these last three years.'

'And before that, Garnet?'

'Not a question asked.'

They came to the courtyard. Paran paused to study the guardsman. 'My father's usually thorough in researching the histories of those entering his employ.'

Garnet grinned, revealing a full set of white teeth. 'Oh, that he did. And here I am. Guess it weren't too dishonourable.'

'You're a veteran.'

'Here, sir, I'll take your horse.'

Paran passed over the reins. He swung about and looked round the courtyard. It seemed smaller than he remembered. The old well, made by the nameless people who'd lived here before even the Kanese, looked ready to crumble into a heap of dust. No craftsman would reset those ancient carved stones, fearing the curse of awakened ghosts. Under the estate house itself were similarly unmortared stones in the deepest reaches, the many rooms and tunnels too bent, twisted and uneven to use.

Servants and groundskeepers moved back and forth in the yard. None had yet noticed Paran's arrival.

Garnet cleared his throat. 'Your father and mother aren't here.'

He nodded. There'd be foals to care for at Emalau, the country estate.

'Your sisters are, though,' Garnet continued. 'I'll have the house servants freshen up your room.'

'It's been left as it was, then?'

Gamet grinned again. 'Well, clear out the extra furniture and casks, then. Storage space at a premium, you know ...'

'As always.' Paran sighed and, without another word, made his way to the house entrance.

The feast hall echoed to Paran's boots as he strode to the long dining table. Cats bolted across the floor, scattering at his approach. He unclasped his travelling cloak, tossed it across the back of a chair, then sat at a longbench and leaned his back against the panelled wall. He closed his eyes.

A few minutes passed, then a woman's voice spoke. 'I thought you were in Itko Kan.'

He opened his eyes. His sister Tavore, a year younger than him, stood close to the head of the table, one hand on the back of their father's chair. She was as plain as ever, a slash of bloodless lines comprising her features, her reddish hair trimmed shorter than was the style. She was taller than the last time he'd seen her, nearly his own height, no longer the awkward child. Her expression revealed nothing as she studied him.

'Reassignment,' Paran said.

'To here? We would have heard.'

Ah, *yes, you would have, wouldn't you?* AM *the sly whisperings among the connected families.*

'Unplanned,' he conceded, 'but done nevertheless. Not stationed here in Unta, though. My visit is only a few days.'

'Have you been promoted?'

He smiled. 'Is the investment about to reap coin? Reluctant as it was, we still must think in terms of potential influence, mustn't we?'

'Managing this family's position is no longer your responsibility, brother.'

'Ah, it's yours now, then? Has Father withdrawn from the daily chores?'

'Slowly. His health is failing. Had you asked, even in Itko Kan...'

He sighed. 'Still making up for me, Tavore? Assuming the burden of my failings? I hardly left here on a carpet of petals, you may recall. In any case, I always assumed the house affairs would fall into capable hands ...'

Her pale eyes narrowed, but pride silenced the obvious question.

He asked, 'And how is Felisin?'

'At her studies. She's not heard of your return. She will be very excited, then crushed to hear of the shortness of your visit.'

'Is she your rival now, Tavore?'

His sister snorted, turning away. 'Felisin? She's too soft for this world, brother. For any world, I think. She's not changed. She'll be happy to see

you.'

He watched her stiff back as she left the hall.

He smelled of sweat – his own and the mare's – travel and grime, and of something else as well... *Old blood and old fear.* Paran looked around. *Much smaller* than I *remembered.*

CHAPTER TWO

With the coming of the Moranth
the tide turned.
And like ships in a harbour
the Free Cities were swept under
Imperial seas.
The war entered its twelfth year,
the Year of the Shattered Moon
and its sudden spawn
of deathly rain and
black-winged promise.
Two cities remained to contest
the Malazan onslaught.
One stalwart, proud banners
beneath Dark's powerful wing.
The other divided –
- without an army,
bereft of allies –
The strong city fell first.

Call to Shadow
Felisin (b.1146)

1163rd Year of Burn's Sleep (two years later)
105th. Year of the Malazan Empire
9th Year of Empress Laseen's Rule

Through the pallor of smoke ravens wheeled. Their calls raised a shrill chorus above the cries of wounded and dying soldiers. The stench of seared flesh hung un moving in the haze.

On the third hill overlooking the fallen city of Pale, Tattersail stood alone. Scattered around the sorceress the curled remains of burnt armour – greaves, breastplates, helms and weapons – lay heaped in piles. An hour earlier there had been men and women wearing that armour, but of them there was no sign. The silence within those empty shells rang like a dirge in Tattersail's head.

Her arms were crossed, tight against her chest. The burgundy cloak with its silver emblem betokening her command of the 2nd Army's wizard cadre now hung from her round shoulders stained and scorched. Her oval, fleshy face, usually parading an expression of cherubic humour, was etched with deep-shadowed lines, leaving her cheeks flaccid and pale.

For all the smells and sounds surrounding Tattersail, she found herself listening to a deeper silence. In some ways it came from the empty armour surrounding her, an absence that was in itself an accusation. But there was another source of the silence. The sorcery that had been unleashed here today had been enough to fray the fabric between the worlds. Whatever dwelt beyond, in the Warrens of Chaos, felt close enough to reach out and touch.

She'd thought her emotions spent, used up by the terror she had just been through, but as she watched the tight ranks of a legion of Moranth Black marching into the city a frost of hatred slipped over her heavy-lidded eyes.

Allies. They're claiming their hour of blood. At the end of that hour there would be a score thousand fewer survivors among the citizens of Pale. The long savage history between the neighbouring peoples was about to have the scales of retribution balanced. By the sword. *Shedunul's mercy, hasn't there been enough?*

A dozen fires raged unchecked through the city. The siege was over, finally, after three long years. But Tattersail knew that there was more to come. Something hid, and waited, in the silence. So she would wait as well. The deaths of this day deserved that much from her – after all, she had failed in all the other ways that mattered.

On the plain below, the bodies of Malazan soldiers covered the ground, a rumpled carpet of dead. Limbs jutted upward here and there, ravens perching on them like overlords. Soldiers who had survived the slaughter wandered in a daze among the bodies, seeking fallen comrades. Tattersail's eyes followed them achingly.

'They're coming,' said a voice, a dozen feet to her left. Slowly she turned. The wizard Hairlock lay sprawled on the burnt armour, the pate of his shaved skull reflecting the dull sky. A wave of sorcery had destroyed him from the hips down. Pink, mud-spattered entrails billowed out from under his ribcage, webbed by drying fluids. A faint penumbra of sorcery revealed his efforts at staying alive.

'Thought you were dead,' Tattersail muttered.

'Felt lucky today.'

'You don't look it.'

Hairlock's grunt released a gout of dark thick blood from below his heart. 'They're coming,' he said. 'See them yet?'

She swung her attention to the slope, her pale eyes narrowing. Four soldiers approached. 'Who are they?'

The wizard didn't answer.

Tattersail faced him again and found his hard gaze fixed on her, intent in the way a dying person achieves in those last moments. 'Thought you'd take a wave through the gut, huh? Well, I suppose that's one way to get shipped out of here.'

His reply surprised her. 'The tough façade ill fits you, 'Sail. Always has.' He frowned and blinked rapidly, fighting off darkness, she supposed. 'There's always the risk of knowing too much. Be glad I spared you.' He smiled, unveiling red-stained teeth. 'Think nice thoughts. The flesh fades.'

She eyed him steadily, wondering at his sudden ... *humanity.* Maybe dying did away with the usual games, the pretences of the living dance. Maybe she just wasn't prepared to see the mortal man in Hairlock finally showing

itself. Tattersail prised her arms from the dreadful, aching hug she had wrapped around herself, and sighed shakily. 'You're right. It's not the time for façades, is it? I never liked you, Hairlock, but I'd never question your courage – I never will.' She studied him critically, a part of her astonished that the horror of his wound didn't so much as make her flinch. 'I don't think even Tayschrenn's arts are enough to save you, Hairlock.'

Something cunning flashed in his eyes and he barked a pained laugh. 'Dear girl,' he gasped, 'your naivety never fails to charm me.'

'Of course,' she snapped, stung at falling for his sudden ingenuousness. 'One last joke on me, just for old times' sake.'

'You misunderstand—'

'Are you so certain? You're saying it isn't over yet. Your hatred of our High Mage is fierce enough to let you slip Hood's cold grasp, is that it? Vengeance from beyond the grave?'

'You must know me by now. I always arrange a back door.'

'You can't even crawl. How do you plan on getting to it?'

The wizard licked his cracked lips. 'Part of the deal,' he said softly. 'The door comes to me. Comes even as we speak.'

Unease coiled around her insides. Behind her, Tattersail heard the crunch of armour and the rattle of iron, the sound arriving like a cold wind. She turned to see the four soldiers appear on the summit. Three men, one woman, mud-smeared and crimson-streaked, their faces almost bone-white. The sorceress found her eyes drawn to the woman, who hung back like an unwelcome afterthought as the three men approached. The girl was young, pretty as an icicle and looking as warm to the touch. *Something wrong there. Careful.*

The man in the lead – a sergeant by the torque on his arm – came up to Tattersail. Set deep in a lined, exhausted face, his dark grey eyes searched hers dispassionately. 'This one?' he asked, turning to the tall, thin black-skinned man who came up beside him.

This man shook his head. 'No, the one we want is over there,' he said. Though he spoke Malazan, his harsh accent was Seven Cities.

The third and last man, also black, slipped past on the sergeant's left and for all his girth seemed to glide forward, his eyes on Hairlock. His ignoring Tattersail made her feel somehow slighted. She considered a well-chosen word or two as he stepped around her, but the effort seemed suddenly too much.

'Well,' she said to the sergeant, 'if you're the burial detail, you're early. He's not dead yet. Of course,' she continued, 'you're not the burial detail. I know that. Hairlock's made some kind of deal – he's thinking he can survive with half a body.'

The sergeant's lips grew taut beneath his grizzled, wiry beard. 'What's your point, Sorceress?'

The black man beside the sergeant glanced back at the young girl still standing a dozen paces behind them. He seemed to shiver, but his lean face was expressionless as he turned back and offered Tattersail an enigmatic shrug before moving past her.

She shuddered involuntarily as power buffeted her senses. She drew a sharp breath. He's *a mage.* Tattersail tracked the man as he joined his comrade at Hairlock's side, striving to see through the muck and blood covering his uniform. 'Who are you people?'

'Ninth squad, the Second.'

'Ninth?' The breath hissed from her teeth. 'You're Bridgeburners.' Her eyes narrowed on the battered sergeant. 'The Ninth. That makes you Whiskeyjack.'

He seemed to flinch.

Tattersail found her mouth dry. She cleared her throat. 'I've heard of you, of course. I've heard the—'

'Doesn't matter,' he interrupted, his voice grating. 'Old stories grow like weeds.'

She rubbed at her face, feeling grime gather under her nails. *Bridgeburners.* They'd been the old Emperor's elite, his favourites, but since Laseen's bloody coup nine years ago they'd been pushed hard into every rat's nest in sight. Almost a decade of this had cut them down to a single, undermanned division. Among them, names had emerged. The survivors, mostly squad sergeants, names that pushed their way into the Malazan armies on Genabackis, and beyond. Names, spicing the already sweeping legend of Onearm's Host. *Detoran,* Antsy, Spindle, *Whiskeyjack.* Names heavy with glory and bitter with the cynicism that every army feeds on. They carried with them like an emblazoned standard the madness of this unending campaign.

Sergeant Whiskeyjack was studying the wreckage on the hill. Tattersail watched him piece together what had happened. A muscle in his cheek twitched. He looked at her with new understanding, a hint of softening behind his grey eyes that almost broke Tattersail then and there. 'Are you the last left in the cadre?' he asked.

She looked away, feeling brittle. 'The last left standing. It wasn't skill, either. Just lucky.'

If he heard her bitterness he gave no sign, falling silent as he watched his two Seven Cities soldiers crouching low over Hairlock.

Tattersail licked her lips, shifted uneasily. She glanced over to the two soldiers. A quiet conversation was under way. She heard Hairlock laugh, the sound a soft jolt that made her wince. 'The tall one,' she said. 'He's a mage, isn't he?'

Whiskeyjack grunted, then said, 'His name's Quick Ben.'

'Not the one he was born with.'

'No.'

She rolled her shoulders against the weight of her cloak, momentarily easing the dull pain in her lower back. 'I should know him, Sergeant. That kind of power gets noticed. He's no novice.'

'No,' Whiskeyjack replied. 'He isn't.'

She felt herself getting angry. 'I want an explanation. What's happening here?'

Whiskeyjack grimaced. 'Not much, by the looks of it.' He raised his voice. 'Quick Ben!'

The mage looked over. 'Some last-minute negotiations, Sergeant,' he said, flashing a white grin.

'Hood's Breath.' Tattersail sighed, turning away. The girl, she saw, still stood at the hill's crest and seemed to be studying the Moranth columns passing into the city. As if sensing Tattersail's attention, her head snapped around. Her expression startled the sorceress. Tattersail pulled her eyes away. 'Is this what's left of your squad, Sergeant? Two desert marauders and a blood-hungry recruit?'

Whiskeyjack's tone was flat: 'I have seven left.'

'This morning?'

'Fifteen.'

Something's wrong here. Feeling a need to say something, she said, 'Better than most.' She cursed silently as the blood drained from the sergeant's face. 'Still,' she added, 'I'm sure they were good men, the ones you lost.'

'Good at dying,' he said.

The brutality of his words shocked her. Mentally reeling, she squeezed shut her eyes, fighting back tears of bewilderment and frustration. Too *much has happened. I'm not ready for this. I'm not ready for Whiskey jack, a man buckling under his own legend, a man who's climbed more than one mountain of the dead in service to the Empire.*

The Bridgeburners hadn't shown themselves much over the past three years. Since the siege began, they'd been assigned the task of undermining Pale's massive, ancient walls. That order had come straight from the capital, and it was either a cruel joke or the product of appalling ignorance: the whole valley was a glacial dump, a rock pile plugging a crevice that reached so far underground even Tattersail's mages had trouble finding its

bottom. *They've been underground three years* running. *When was the last time they saw the sun?*

Tattersail stiffened suddenly. 'Sergeant.' She opened her eyes to him. 'You've been in your tunnels since this morning?'

With sinking understanding, she watched anguish flit across the man's face. 'What tunnels?' he said softly, then moved to stride past her.

She reached out and closed her hand on his arm. A shock seemed to run through him. 'Whiskeyjack,' she whispered, 'you've guessed as much. About – about me, about what happened here on this hill, all these soldiers.' She hesitated, then said, 'Failure's something we share. I'm sorry.'

He pulled away, eyes averted. 'Don't be, Sorceress.' He met her gaze. 'Regret's not something we can afford.'

She watched him walk to his soldiers.

A young woman's voice spoke directly behind Tattersail. 'We numbered fourteen hundred this morning, Sorceress.'

Tattersail turned. At this close range, she saw that the girl couldn't be more than fifteen years old. The exception was her eyes, which held the dull glint of weathered onyx – they looked ancient, every emotion eroded away into extinction. 'And now?'

The girl's shrug was almost careless. 'Thirty, maybe thirty-five. Four of the five tunnels fell in completely. We were in the fifth and dug our way out. Fiddler and Hedge are working on the others, but they figure everybody else's been buried for good. They tried to round up some help.' A cold, knowing smile spread across her mud streaked face. 'But your master, the High Mage, stopped them.'

'Tayschrenn did what? Why?'

The girl frowned, as if disappointed. Then she simply walked away, stopping at the hill's crest and facing the city again.

Tattersail stared after her. The girl had thrown that last statement at her as if hunting for some particular response. *Complicity?* In any case, a clean

miss. *Tayschrenn's not making any friends. Good.* The day had been a disaster, and the blame fell squarely at the High Mage's feet. She stared at Pale, then lifted her gaze to the smoke-filled sky above it.

That massive, looming shape she had greeted every morning for the last three years was indeed gone. She still had trouble believing it, despite the evidence of her eyes. 'You warned us,' she whispered to the empty sky, as the memories of the morning returned. 'You warned us, didn't you?'

She'd been sleeping with Calot the past four months: a little diversionary pleasure to ease the boredom of a siege that wasn't going anywhere. At least, that was how she explained to herself their unprofessional conduct. It was more than that, of course, much more. But being honest with herself had never been one of Tattersail's strengths.

The magical summons, when it came, awakened her before Calot. The mage's small but well-proportioned body was snug in the many soft pillows of her flesh. She opened her eyes to find him clinging to her like a child. Then he, too, sensed the calling and awoke to her smile.

'Hairlock?' he asked, shivering as he climbed out from under the blankets.

Tattersail grimaced. 'Who else? The man never sleeps.'

'What now, I wonder?' He stood, looking around for his tunic.

She was watching him. He was so thin, making them an odd combination. Through the faint dawn light seeping through the canvas tent walls, the sharp, bony angles of his body looked soft, almost child-like. For a man a century old, he carried it well. 'Hairlock's been running errands for Dujek,' she said. 'It's probably just an update.'

Calot grunted as he pulled on his boots. 'That's what you get for taking command of the cadre, 'Sail. Anyway, it was easier saluting Nedurian, let me tell you. Whenever I look at you, I just want to—'

'Stick to business, Calot,' Tattersail said, meaning it with humour though it came out with enough of an edge to make Calot glance at her sharply.

'Something up?' he asked quietly, the old frown finding its familiar lines on his high forehead.

Thought *I'd got rid of those.* Tattersail sighed. 'Can't tell, except that Hairlock's contacted both of us. If it was just a report, you'd still be snoring.'

In growing tension they finished dressing in silence. Less than an hour later Calot would be incinerated beneath a wave of blue fire, and ravens would be answering Tattersail's despairing scream. But, for the moment, the two mages were readying themselves for an unscheduled gathering at High Fist Dujek Onearm's command tent.

In the muddy path beyond Calot's tent, soldiers of the last watch huddled around braziers filled with burning horse dung, holding out hands to the heat. Few walked the pathways, the hour still too early. Row upon row of grey tents climbed the hills overlooking the plain that surrounded the city of Pale. Regimental standards ruffled sullenly in a faint breeze – the wind had turned since last night, carrying to Tattersail the stench of the latrine trenches. Overhead the remaining handful of stars dimmed into insignificance in the lightening sky. The world seemed almost peaceful.

Drawing her cloak against the chill, Tattersail paused outside the tent and turned to study the enormous mountain hanging suspended a quarter-mile above the city of Pale. She scanned the battered face of Moon's Spawn – its name for as long as she could remember. Ragged as a blackened tooth, the basalt fortress was home to the most powerful enemy the Malazan Empire had ever faced. High above the earth, Moon's Spawn could not be breached by siege. Even Laseen's own undead army, the T'lan Imass, who travelled as easily as dust on the wind, were unable, or unwilling, to penetrate its magical defences.

Pale's wizards had found a powerful ally. Tattersail recalled that the Empire had locked horns with the Moon's mysterious lord once before, in the days of the Emperor. Things had threatened to get ugly, but then Moon's Spawn withdrew from the game. No one still living knew why – just one of the thousand secrets the Emperor took with him to his watery grave.

The Moon's reappearance here on Genabackis had been a surprise. And this time, there was no last-minute reprieve. A half-dozen legions of the sorcerous Tiste Andii descended from Moon's Spawn, and under the command of a warlord named Caladan Brood they joined forces with the Crimson Guard mercenaries. Together, the two armies proceeded to drive back the Malaz 5th Army, which had been pushing eastward along the northern edge of Rhivi Plain. For the past four years the battered 5th had been bogged down in Blackdog Forest, forcing them to make a stand against Brood and the Crimson Guard. It was a stand fast becoming a death sentence.

But, clearly, Caladan Brood and the Tiste Andii weren't the only inhabitants of Moon's Spawn. An unseen lord remained in command of the fortress, bringing it here and sealing a pact with Pale's formidable wizards.

Tattersail's cadre had little hope of magically challenging such opposition. So the siege had ground to a halt, with the exception of the Bridgeburners who never relaxed their stubborn efforts to undermine the city's ancient walls.

Stay, she prayed to Moon's Spawn. Turn *your face endlessly, and keep the smell of blood, the screams of the dying from settling on this land. Wait for us to blink first.*

Calot waited beside her. He said nothing, understanding the ritual this had become. It was one of the many reasons why Tattersail loved the man. As a friend, of course. Nothing serious, nothing frightening in the love for a friend.

'I sense impatience in Hairlock,' Calot murmured beside her.

She sighed. 'I do, too. That's why I'm reluctant.'

'I know, but we can't dally too long, 'Sail.' He grinned mischievously. 'Bad form.'

'Hmmm, can't have them jumping to conclusions, can we?'

'They wouldn't have to jump very far. Anyway,' his smile faltered slightly, 'let's get going.'

A few minutes later they arrived at the command tent. The lone marine standing guard at the flap seemed nervous as he saluted the two mages. Tattersail paused and searched his eyes. 'Seventh Regiment?'

Avoiding her gaze, the guard nodded. 'Yes, Sorceress. Third Squad.'

'Thought you looked familiar. Give my regards to Sergeant Rusty.' She stepped closer. 'Something in the air, soldier?'

He blinked. 'High in the air, Sorceress. High as they come.'

Tattersail glanced at Calot, who had paused at the tent flap. Calot puffed out his cheeks, making a comical face. 'Thought I smelled him.'

She winced at this confirmation. The guard, she saw, was sweating under his iron helmet. 'Thanks for the warning, soldier.'

'Always an even trade, Sorceress.' The man snapped a second salute, this one sharper, and in its way more personal. Years *and years of this. Insisting I'm family to them, one of* the *2nd Army — the oldest intact force, one of the Emperor's own. Always an even trade, Sorceress. Save our skins, we'll save yours. Family, after all. Why, then, do 1 always feel so estranged from them?* Tattersail returned the salute.

They entered the command tent. She sensed immediately the presence of power, what Calot called *smell.* It made his eyes water. It gave her a migraine headache. This particular emanation was a power she knew well, and it was anathema to her own. Which made the headaches all the worse.

Inside the tent, lanterns cast a dim smoky light on the dozen or so wooden chairs in the first compartment. A camp-table off to one side held a tin pitcher of watered wine and six tarnished cups that glistened with droplets of condensation.

Calot muttered beside her, 'Hood's Breath, 'Sail, I hate this.'

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, Tattersail saw, through the opening that led into the tent's second compartment, a familiar robed figure. He leaned with long-fingered hands on Dujek's map-table. His magenta cloak

rippled like water though he remained motionless. 'Oh, really now,' Tattersail whispered.

'Just my thought,' Calot said, wiping his eyes.

'Do you think,' she said, as they took their seats, 'it's a studied pose?'

Calot grinned. 'Absolutely. Laseen's High Mage couldn't read a battle map if his life depended on it.'

'So long as our lives don't depend on it.'

A voice spoke from a chair near them, 'Today we work.'

Tattersail scowled at the preternatural darkness enwreathing the chair. 'You're as bad as Tayschrenn, Hairlock. And be glad I didn't decide to sit in that chair.'

Dully, a row of yellow teeth appeared, then the rest of the mage took shape as Hairlock relinquished the spell. Beads of sweat marked the man's flat, scarred brow and shaved pate – nothing unusual there: Hairlock would sweat in an ice-pit. He held his head at an angle, achieving in his expression something like smug detachment combined with contempt. He fixed his small dark eyes on Tattersail. 'You remember work, don't you?' His smile broadened, further flattening his mashed, misaligned nose. 'It's what you were doing before you started rolling in the sack with dear Calot here. Before you went soft.'

Tattersail drew breath for a retort, but was interrupted by Calot's slow, easy drawl. 'Lonely, Hairlock? Should I tell you that the camp-followers demand double the coin from you?' He waved a hand, as if clearing away unsavoury thoughts. 'The simple fact is, Dujek chose Tattersail to command the cadre after Nedurian's untimely demise at Mott Wood. You may not like it, but that's just too bad. It's the price you pay for ambivalence.'

Hairlock reached down and brushed a speck of dirt from his satin slippers, which had, improbably, escaped unmarred the muddy streets outside. 'Blind faith, dear comrades, is for fools—'

He was interrupted by the tent flap swishing aside. High Fist Dujek Onearm entered, the soap of his morning shave still clotting the hair in his ears, the smell of cinnamon water wafting after him.

Over the years, Tattersail had come to attach much to that aroma. Security, stability, *sanity.* Dujek Onearm represented all those things, and not just to her but to the army that fought for him. As he stopped now in the centre of the room and surveyed the three mages, she leaned back slightly and, from under heavy lids, studied the High Fist. Three years of enforced passivity in this siege seemed to have acted like a tonic on the ageing man. He looked more like fifty rather than his seventy-nine years. His grey eyes remained sharp and unyielding in his tanned, lean face. He stood straight, which made him seem taller than his five and a half feet, wearing simple, unadorned leathers, stained as much by sweat as by the Imperial magenta dye. The stump of his left arm, just below the shoulder, was wrapped in leather strips. His hairy chalk-white calves were visible between the sharkskin straps of the Napan sandals.

Calot withdrew a handkerchief from his sleeve and tossed it to Dujek.

The High Mage snagged it. 'Again? Damn that barber,' he growled, wiping the soap from his jaw and ears. 'I swear he does it on purpose.' He balled the handkerchief and flung it on to Calot's lap. 'Now, we're all here. Good. Regular business first. Hairlock, you finished jawing with the boys below?'

Hairlock stifled a yawn. 'Some sapper named Fiddler took me in, showed me around.' He paused to pluck lint from his brocaded sleeve, then met Dujek's eyes. 'Give them six or seven years and they might have reached the city walls by then.'

'It's pointless,' Tattersail said, 'which is what I put in my report.' She squinted up at Dujek. 'Assuming it ever made it to the Imperial Court.'

'Camel's still swimming,' Calot said.

Dujek grunted – as close as he ever got to laughing. 'All right, cadre, listen carefully. Two things.' A faint scowl crossed his scarred features.

'One, the Empress has sent a Claw. They're in the city, hunting down Pale's wizards.'

A chill danced up Tattersail's spine. No one liked having the Claws around. Those Imperial assassins – Laseen's favoured weapon – kept their poisoned daggers sharp for anyone and everyone, Malazans included.

It seemed Calot was thinking the same thing, for he sat up sharply. 'If they're here for any other reason ...'

'They'll have to come through me first,' Dujek said, his lone hand reaching down to rest on the pommel of his longsword.

He has an audience, there in the other room. He's telling the man commanding the Claw how things stand. Shedunul bless him.

Hairlock spoke. 'They'll go to ground. They're wizards, not idiots.'

It was a moment before Tattersail understood the man's comment. *Oh, right. Pale's wizards.*

Dujek glanced down at Hairlock, gauging, then he nodded. 'Two, we're attacking Moon's Spawn today.'

In the other compartment, High Mage Tayschrenn turned at these words and approached slowly. Within his hood a broad smile creased his dark face, a momentary cracking of seamless features. The smile passed quickly, the ageless skin becoming smooth once again. 'Hello, my colleagues,' he said, droll and menacing all at once.

Hairlock snorted. 'Keep the melodrama to a minimum, Tayschrenn, and we'll all be happier.'

Ignoring Hairlock's comment, the High Mage continued, 'The Empress has lost her patience with Moon's Spawn—'

Dujek cocked his head and interrupted, his voice softly grating. 'The Empress is scared enough to hit first and hit hard. Tell it plain, Magicker. This is your front line you're talking to here. Show some respect, dammit.'

The High Mage shrugged. 'Of course, High Fist.' He faced the cadre. 'Your group, myself and three other High Mages will strike Moon's Spawn within the hour. The North Campaign has drawn most of the edifice's inhabitants away. We believe that the Moon's lord is alone. For almost three years his mere presence has been enough to hold us in check. This morning, my colleagues, we will test this lord's mettle.'

'And hope to hell he's been bluffing all this time,' Dujek added, a scowl deepening the lines on his forehead. 'Any questions?'

'How soon can I get a transfer?' Calot asked.

Tattersail cleared her throat. 'What do we know about the Lord of Moon's Spawn?'

'Scant little, I'm afraid,' Tayschrenn said, his eyes veiled. 'A Tiste Andii, for certain. An archmage.'

Hairlock leaned forward and deliberately spat at the floor in front of Tayschrenn. 'Tiste Andii, High Mage? I think we can be a little more specific than that, don't you?'

Tattersail's migraine worsened. She realized she was holding her breath, slowly forced it out as she gauged Tayschrenn's reaction – to the man's words and to the traditional Seven Cities challenge.

'An archmage,' Tayschrenn repeated. 'Perhaps *the* Archmage of the Tiste Andii. Dear Hairlock,' he added, his voice lowering a notch, 'your primitive tribal gestures remain quaint, if somewhat tasteless.'

Hairlock bared his teeth. 'The Tiste Andii are Mother Dark's first children. You've felt the tremors through the Warrens of Sorcery, Tayschrenn. So have I. Ask Dujek about the reports coming down from the North Campaign. Elder magic – Kurald Galain. The Lord of Moon's Spawn is the Master Archmage — you know his name as well as I do.'

'I know nothing of the sort,' the High Mage snapped, losing his calm at last. 'Perhaps you'd care to enlighten us, Hairlock, and then I can begin inquiries as to your sources.'

'Ahh!' Hairlock bolted forward in his chair, an eager malice in his taut face. 'A threat from the High Mage. Now we're getting somewhere. Answer me this, then. Why only three other High Mages? We've hardly been thinned out that badly. More, why didn't we do this two years ago?'

Whatever was building between Hairlock and Tayschrenn was interrupted by Dujek, who growled wordlessly, then said, 'We're desperate, mage. The North Campaign has gone sour. The Fifth is damn near gone, and won't be getting any reinforcements until next spring. The point is, the Moon's lord could have his army back any day now. I don't want to have to send you up against an army of Tiste Andii, and I sure as hell don't want the Second having to show two fronts with a relieving force coming down on them. Bad tactics, and whoever this Caladan Brood is, he's shown himself adept at making us pay for our mistakes.'

'Caladan Brood,' Calot murmured. 'I swear I've heard that name somewhere before. Odd that I've never given it much thought.'

Tattersail's eyes narrowed on Tayschrenn. Calot was right: the name of the man commanding the Tiste Andii alongside the Crimson Guard *did* sound familiar – but in an old way, echoing ancient legends, perhaps, or some epic poem.

The High Mage met her gaze, flat and calculating. 'The need,' he said, turning to the others, 'for justifications has passed. The Empress has commanded, and we must obey.'

Hairlock snorted a second time. 'Speaking of twisting arms,' he sat back, still smiling contemptuously at Tayschrenn, 'remember how we played cat and mouse at Aren? This plan has your stink on it. You've been itching for a chance like this for a long time.' His grin turned savage. 'Who, then, are the other three High Mages? Let me guess—'

'Enough!' Tayschrenn stepped close to Hairlock, who went very still, eyes glittering.

The lanterns had dimmed. Calot used the handkerchief in his lap to wipe tears from his cheeks.

Power, oh, damn, my head feels ready to crack wide open.

'Very well,' Hairlock whispered, 'let's lay it out on the table. I'm sure the High Fist will appreciate you putting all his suspicions in the proper order. Make it plain, old friend.'

Tattersail glanced at Dujek. The commander's face had closed up, his sharp eyes narrow and fixed on Tayschrenn. He was doing some hard thinking.

Calot leaned against her. 'What the hell's going on, 'Sail?'

'No idea,' she whispered, 'but it's heating up nicely.' Though she'd made her comment light, her mind was whirling around a cold knot of fear. Hairlock had been with the Empire longer than she had – or Calot. He'd been among the sorcerers who'd fought against the Malazans in Seven Cities, before Aren fell and the Holy Falah'd were scattered, before he'd been given the choice of death or service to the new masters. He'd joined the 2nd's cadre at Pan'potsun – like Dujek himself he'd been there, with the Emperor's old guard, when the first vipers of usurpation had stirred, the day the Empire's First Sword was betrayed and brutally murdered. Hairlock *knew* something. But what?

'All right,' Dujek drawled, 'we've got work to do. Let's get at it.'

Tattersail sighed. Old Onearm's way with words. She swung a look on the man. She knew him well, not as a friend – Dujek didn't make friends – but as the best military mind left in the Empire. If, as Hairlock had just implied, the High Fist was being betrayed by someone, somewhere, and if Tayschrenn was part of it ... *we're a bent bough*, Calot had once said of Onearm's Host, *and beware the Empire when it breaks. Seven Cities' soldiery, the closeted ghosts of the conquered but unconquerable ...*

Tayschrenn gestured to her and to the other mages. Tattersail rose, as did Calot. Hairlock remained seated, eyes closed as if asleep.

Calot said to Dujek, 'About that transfer.'

'Later,' the High Fist grunted. 'Paperwork's a nightmare when you've only got one arm.' He surveyed his cadre and was about to add something but

Calot spoke first.

'Anomandaris.'

Hairlock's eyes snapped open, found Tayschrenn with bright pleasure. 'Ahhh,' he said, into the silence following Calot's single pronouncement. 'Of course. Three more High Mages? Only three?'

Tattersail stared at Dujek's pale, still face. 'The poem,' she said quietly. 'I remember now.

'Caladan Brood, the menhired one,
winter-bearing, harrowed and sorrowless ...'

Calot picked up the next lines.

'*... in a tomb bereaved of words,*
and in his hands that have crushed anvils—'

Tattersail continued,

' *the hammer of his song –*
he lives asleep, so give silent warning
to all – wake him not.
Wake him not.'

Everyone in the compartment was staring at Tattersail now as her last words fell away. 'He's awake, it seems,' she said, her mouth dry. '"Anomandaris", the epic poem by Fisher Keltath.'

'The poem's not about Caladan Brood,' Dujek said, frowning.

'No,' she agreed. 'It's mostly about his companion.'

Hairlock climbed slowly to his feet. He stepped close to Tayschrenn. 'Anomander Rake, Lord of the Tiste Andii, who are the souls of Starless Night. Rake, the Mane of Chaos. That's who the Moon's lord is, and you're pitting four High Mages and a single cadre against him.'

Tayschrenn's smooth face held the faintest sheen of sweat now. 'The Tiste Andii,' he said, in an even voice, 'are not like us. To you they may seem unpredictable, but they aren't. Just different. They have no cause of their

own. They simply move from one human drama to the next. Do you actually think Anomander Rake will stay and fight?'

'Has Caladan Brood backed away?' Hairlock snapped.

'He is not Tiste Andii, Hairlock. He's human – some say with Barghast blood, but none the less he shares nothing of Elder blood, or its ways.'

Tattersail said, 'You're counting on Rake betraying Pale's wizards – betraying the pact made between them.'

'The risk is not as overreaching as it may seem,' the High Mage said. 'Bellurdan has done the research in Genabaris, Sorceress. Some new scrolls of *Gothos' Folly* were discovered in a mountain fastness beyond Blackdog Forest. Among the writings are discussions of the Tiste Andii, and other peoples from the Elder Age. And remember, Moon's Spawn has retreated from a direct confrontation with the Empire before.'

The waves of fear sweeping through Tattersail made her knees weak. She sat down again, heavily enough to make the camp chair creak. 'You've condemned us to death,' she said, 'if your gamble proves wrong. Not just us, High Mage, all of Onearm's Host.'

Tayschrenn swung round slowly, putting his back to Hairlock and the others. 'Empress Laseen's orders,' he said, without turning. 'Our colleagues come by Warren. When they arrive, I will detail the positioning. That is all.' He strode into the map room, resumed his original stance.

Dujek seemed to have aged in front of Tattersail's eyes. Swiftly she slid her glance from him, too anguished to meet the abandonment in his eyes, and the suspicion curdling beneath its surface. *Coward – that's what you are, woman. A coward.*

Finally the High Fist cleared his throat. 'Prepare your Warrens, cadre. As usual, always an even trade.'

Give the High Mage credit, Tattersail thought. There was Tayschrenn, standing on the first hill, almost inside the Moon's shadow. They had

arrayed themselves into three groups, each taking a hilltop on the plain outside Pale's walls. The cadre's was most distant, Tayschrenn's the closest. On the centre hill stood the three other High Mages. Tattersail knew them all. Nightchill, raven-haired, tall, imperious and with a cruel streak the old Emperor used to drool over. At her side her lifelong companion, Bellurdan, skull-crusher, a Thelomen giant who would test his prodigious strength against the Moon's portal, should it come to that. And A'Karonys, fire-wielder, short and round, his burning staff taller than a spear.

The 2nd and 6th Armies had formed ranks on the plain, weapons bared and awaiting the call to march on the city when the time came. Seven thousand veterans and four thousand recruits. The Black Moranth legions lined the ridge to the west a quarter-mile distant.

No wind stirred the midday air. Biting midges roved in visible clouds through the soldiers waiting below. The sky was overcast, the cloud cover thin but absolute.

Tattersail stood on the hill's crest, sweat running down under her clothing, and watched the soldiers on the plain before facing her meagre cadre. At full strength, six mages should have been arrayed behind her, but there were only two. Off to one side Hairlock waited, wrapped in the dark grey rain-cloak that was his battle attire – looking smug.

Calot nudged Tattersail and jerked his head towards Hairlock. 'What's he so happy about?'

'Hairlock,' Tattersail called. The man swung his head. 'Were you right about the three High Mages?'

He smiled, then turned away again.

'I hate it when he's hiding something,' Calot said.

The sorceress grunted. 'He's added something up, all right. What's so particular about Nightchill, Bellurdan and A'Karonys? Why did Tayschrenn pick them and how did Hairlock know he'd pick them?'

'Questions, questions.' Calot sighed. 'All three are old hands at this kind of stuff. Back in the days of the Emperor they each commanded a company of

Adepts – when the Empire had enough mages in the ranks to form actual companies. A'Karonys climbed through the ranks in the Falari Campaign, and Bellurdan and Nightchill were from before even then – came down from Fenn on the Quon mainland during the unification wars.'

'All old hands,' Tattersail mused, 'as you said. None have been active lately, have they? Their last campaign was Seven Cities—'

'Where A'Karonys took a beating in the Pan'potsun Wastes—'

'He was left hanging – the Emperor had just been assassinated. Everything was chaotic. The T'lan Imass refused to acknowledge the new Empress, marched themselves off into the Jhag Odhan.'

'Rumour has it they're back, at half-strength – whatever they ran into out there wasn't pleasant.'

Tattersail nodded. 'Nightchill and Bellurdan were told to report to Nathilog, left sitting on their hands for the past six, seven years—'

'Until Tayschrenn sent the Thelomen off to Genabaris, to study a pile of ancient scrolls, of all things.'

'I'm frightened,' Tattersail admitted. 'Very frightened. Did you see Dujek's face? He *knew* something – a realization, and it hit him like a dagger in the back.'

'Time to work,' Hairlock called.

Calot and Tattersail swung around.

A shiver ran through her. Moon's Spawn had been revolving steadily for the last three years. It had just stopped. Near its very top, on the side facing them, was a small ledge, and a shadowed recess had appeared. A portal. No movement showed yet. 'He knows,' she whispered.

'And he isn't running,' Calot added.

Down on the first hill, High Mage Tayschrenn rose and lifted his arms out to the sides. A wave of golden flame spanned his hands, then rolled upward, growing as it raced towards Moon's Spawn. The spell crashed against the

black rock, sending chunks hurtling out, then down. A rain of death descended into the city of Pale, and among the Malazan legions waiting in the plain.

'It's begun,' Calot breathed.

Silence answered Tayschrenn's first attack, save for the faint scatter of rubble on the city's tiled rooftops and the distant cries of wounded soldiers on the plain. Everyone's eyes were trained upward.

The reply was not what anyone expected.

A black cloud enshrouded Moon's Spawn, followed by faint shrieking. A moment later the cloud spread out, fragmenting, and Tattersail realized what she was seeing.

Ravens.

Thousands upon thousands of Great Ravens. They must have nested among the crags and pocks in the Moon's surface. Their shrieks grew more defined, a caterwaul of outrage. They wheeled out from the Moon, their fifteen-foot wingspans catching the wind and lifting them high above the city and plain.

Fear lurched into terror in Tattersail's heart.

Hairlock barked a laugh and whirled to them. 'These are the Moon's messengers, colleagues!' Madness glittered in his eyes. 'These carrion birds!' He flung back his cloak and raised his arms. 'Imagine a lord who's kept thirty thousand Great Ravens well fed!'

A figure had appeared on the ledge before the portal, its arms upraised, long silver hair blowing from its head.

Mane of Chaos. Anomander Rake. Lord of the black-skinned Tiste Andii, who has looked down on a hundred thousand winters, who has tasted the blood of dragons, who leads the last of his kind, seated in the Throne of Sorrow and a kingdom tragic and fey — a kingdom with no land to call its own.

Anomander Rake looked tiny against the backdrop of his edifice, almost insubstantial at this distance. The illusion was about to be shattered. She gasped as the aura of his power bloomed outward – *to see it at such a distance* ... 'Channel your Warrens,' Tattersail commanded, her voice cracking. 'Now!'

Even as Rake gathered his power, twin balls of blue fire raced upward from the centre hill. They struck the Moon near its base and rocked it. Tayschrenn launched another wave of gilden flames, crashing with amber spume and red-tongued smoke.

The Moon's lord responded. A black, writhing wave rolled down to the first hill. The High Mage was buffeted to his knees deflecting it, the hilltop around him blighted as the necrous power rolled down the slopes, engulfing nearby ranks of soldiers. Tattersail watched as a midnight flash swallowed the hapless men, followed by a thump that thundered through the earth. When the flash dissipated, the soldiers lay in rotting heaps, mown down like stalks of grain.

Kurald Galain sorcery. Elder magic, the Breath of Chaos.

Her breaths coming fast and tight in her chest, Tattersail felt her Thyr Warren flow into her. She shaped it, muttering chain-words under her breath, then unleashed the power. Calot followed, drawing from his Mockra Warren. Hairlock surrounded himself in his own mysterious source, and the cadre entered the fray.

Everything narrowed down for Tattersail from then on, yet a part of her mind remained distant, held on a leash of tenor, observing with a kind of muffled vision all that happened around her.

The world became a living nightmare, as sorcery flew upward to batter Moon's Spawn, and sorcery rained downward, indiscriminate and devastating. Earth rose skyward in thundering columns. Rocks ripped through men like hot stones through snow. A downpour of ash descended to cover the living and dead alike. The sky dimmed to pallid rose, the sun a coppery disc behind the haze.

She saw a wave sweep past Hairlock's defences, cutting him in half. His howl was more rage than pain, instantly muted as virulent power washed over Tattersail and she found her own defences assailed by the sorcery's cold, screaming will as it sought to destroy her. She reeled back, brought up short by Calot as he added his Mockra power to bolster her faltering parries. Then the assault passed, sweeping on and down the hill to their left.

Tattersail had fallen to her knees. Calot stood over her, chaining words of power around her, his face turned away from Moon's Spawn, fixed on something or someone down below on the plain. His eyes were wide with terror.

Too late Tattersail understood what was happening. Calot was defending her at his own expense. A final act, even as he watched his own death erupt around him. A blast of bright fire engulfed him. Abruptly the net of protection over Tattersail vanished. A wash of crackling heat from where Calot had stood sent her tumbling to one side. She felt more than heard her own shriek, and her sense of distance closed in then, a layer of mental defence obliterated.

Spitting dirt and ashes, Tattersail climbed to her feet and fought on, no longer launching attacks, just struggling to remain alive. Somewhere in the back of her head a voice was screaming, urgent, panicked. *Calot had faced the plain not Moon's Spawn — he'd faced* right! *Hairlock had been struck from the plain!*

She watched as a Kenryll'ah demon arose beneath Nightchill. Laughing shrilly, the towering, gaunt creature tore Nightchill limb from limb. It had begun feeding by the time Bellurdan arrived. The Thelomen bellowed as the demon raked its knife-like talons against his chest. Ignoring the wounds and the blood that sprayed from them, he closed his hands around the demon's head and crushed it.

A'Karonys unleashed gouts of flame from the staff in his hands until Moon's Spawn almost disappeared inside a ball of fire. Then ethereal wings of ice closed around the short, fat wizard, freezing him where he stood. An instant later he was crushed to dust.

Magic rained in an endless storm around Tayschrenn, where he still knelt on the withered, blackened hilltop. But every wave directed his way he shunted aside, wreaking devastation among the soldiers cowering on the plain. Through the carnage filling the air, through the ash and shrill-tongued ravens, through the raining rocks and the screams of the wounded and dying, through the blood-chilling shrieks of demons flinging themselves into ranks of soldiery – through it all sounded the steady thunder of the High Mage's onslaught. Enormous cliffs, sheared from the Moon's face and raging with flame and trailing columns of black smoke, fell down into the city of Pale, transforming the city into its own cauldron of death and chaos.

Her ears numbed and body throbbing as if her flesh itself gasped for breath, Tattersail was slow to grasp that the sorcery had ceased. Even the voice shrieking in the back of her mind had fallen silent. She raised bleary eyes to see Moon's Spawn, billowing smoke and ablaze in a dozen places on its ravaged mien, moving away, pulling back. Then it was past the city, unsteady in its revolutions and leaning to one side. Moon's Spawn headed south, towards the distant Tahlyn Mountains.

She looked around, vaguely recalling that a company of soldiers had sought refuge on the blasted summit. Then something had hit her, taking all she had left to resist it. Now, nothing was left of the company but their armour. *Always an even trade, Sorceress.* She fought against a sob, then swung her attention to the first hill.

Tayschrenn was down, but alive. A half-dozen marines scampered up the hillside to gather around the High Mage. A minute later they carried him away.

Bellurdan, most of his clothing burned away and his flesh scorched red, remained on the centre hill, collecting Nightchill's scattered limbs and raising his voice in a mournful wail. The sight, in all its horror and pathos, struck Tattersail's heart like a hammer on an anvil. Quickly she turned away. 'Damn you, Tayschrenn.'

Pale had fallen. The price was Onearm's Host and four mages. Only now were the Black Moranth legions moving in. Tattersail's jaw clenched, her lips drawing from their fullness into a thin white line. Something tugged at

her memory, and she felt a growing certainty that this scene was not yet played out.

The sorceress waited.

The Warrens *of Magic dwelt in the beyond. Find the gate and nudge it open a crack. What leaks out is yours to shape.* With these words a young woman set out on the path to sorcery. *Open yourself to the Warren that comes to you — that finds you. Draw forth its power – as much as your body and soul are capable of containing — but remember, when the body fails, the gate closes.*

Tattersail's limbs ached. She felt as though someone had been beating her with clubs for the past two hours. The last thing she had expected was that bitter taste on her tongue that said something nasty and ugly had come to the hilltop. Such warnings seldom came to a practitioner unless the gate was open, a Warren unveiled and bristling with power. She'd heard tales from other sorcerers, and she'd read mouldy scrolls that touched on moments like these, when the power arrived groaning and deadly, and each time, it was said, a *god* had stepped on to the mortal ground.

If she could have driven the nail of immortal presence in this place, however, it would have to be Hood, the God of Death. Yet her instincts said no. She didn't believe a god had arrived, but *something else had.* What frustrated the sorceress was that she couldn't decide who among the people surrounding her was the dangerous one. Something kept drawing her gaze back to the young girl. But the child seemed only half there most of the time.

The voices behind her finally drew her attention. Sergeant Whiskeyjack stood over Quick Ben and the other soldier, both of whom still knelt at Hairlock's side. Quick Ben clutched an oblong object, wrapped in hides, and was looking up at his sergeant as if awaiting approval.

There was tension between the two men. Frowning, Tattersail walked over. 'What are you doing?' she asked Quick Ben, her eyes on the object in

the wizard's almost feminine hands. He seemed not to have heard, his eyes on the sergeant.

Whiskeyjack shot her a glance. 'Go ahead, Quick,' he growled, then strode off to stand at the hill's edge, facing west – towards the Moranth Mountains.

Quick Ben's fine, ascetic features tightened. He nodded at his companion. 'Get ready, Kalam.'

The soldier named Kalam leaned back on his haunches, his hands in his sleeves. The position seemed an odd response to Quick Ben's request, but the mage seemed satisfied. Tattersail watched as he laid one of his thin, spidery hands on Hairlock's trembling, blood-splashed chest. He whispered a few chaining words and closed his eyes.

'That sounded like Denul,' Tattersail said, glancing at Kalam, who remained motionless in his crouch. 'But not quite,' she added slowly. 'He's twisted it somehow.' She fell silent then, seeing something in Kalam that reminded her of a snake waiting to strike. Wouldn't take much to set him off, I think. Just a few more ill-timed words, a careless move towards Quick Ben or Hairlock. The man was big, bearish, but she remembered his dangerous glide past her. Snake *indeed, the man's a killer, a soldier who's reached the next level in the art of murder. Not just a job any more, this man likes it.* She wondered then if it wasn't this energy, this quiet promise of menace, that swept over her with the flavour of sexual tension. Tattersail sighed. A day for perversity.

Quick Ben had resumed his chaining words, this time over the object, which he now set down beside Hairlock. She watched as enwreathing power enveloped the wrapped object, watched in growing apprehension as the mage traced his long fingers along the hide's seams. The energy trickled from him with absolute control. He was her superior in the lore. He had opened a Warren she didn't even recognize.

'Who are you people?' she whispered, stepping back.

Hairlock's eyes snapped open, clear of pain and shock. His gaze found Tattersail and the stained smile came easily to his broken lips. 'Lost arts, 'Sail. What you're about to see hasn't been done in a thousand years.' His

face darkened then and the smile faded. Something burned in his eyes. 'Think back, woman! Calot and I. When we went down. What did you see? Did you feel something? Something odd? Come on, think! Look at me! See my wound, see how I'm lying! Which direction was I facing when that wave hit?'

She saw the fire in his eyes, of anger mingled with triumph. 'I'm not sure,' she said slowly. 'Something, yes.' That detached, reasoning part of her mind that had laboured with her throughout the battle, that had screamed in her mind at Calot's death, screamed in answer to the waves of sorcery – to *the fact that they had come from the plain.* Her eyes narrowed on Hairlock. 'Anomander Rake never bothered to aim. He was being indiscriminate. Those waves of power were *aimed,* weren't they? Coming at us from the wrong side.' She was trembling. 'But why? Why would Tayschrenn do that?'

Hairlock reached up one mangled hand and clutched Quick Ben's cloak. 'Use her, Mage. I'll take the chance.'

Tattersail's thoughts raced. Hairlock had been sent down into the tunnels by Dujek. And Whiskeyjack and his squad had been down there. A deal had been struck. 'Hairlock, what's happening here?' she demanded, fear clenching the muscles of her neck and shoulders. 'What do you mean, "use" me?'

'You're not blind, woman!'

'Quiet,' Quick Ben said. He laid down the object on the wizard's ravaged chest, positioning it carefully so that it was centred lengthways along Hairlock's breastbone. The top end reached to just under the man's chin, the bottom end extending a few inches beyond what was left of his torso. Webs of black energy spun incessantly over the hide's mottled surface.

Quick Ben passed a hand over the object and the web spread outward. The glittering black threads traced a chaotic pattern that insinuated Hairlock's entire body, over flesh and through it, the pattern ever changing, the changes coming faster and faster. Hairlock jerked, his eyes bulging, then fell back. A breath escaped his lungs in a slow, steady hiss. When it ceased with a wet gurgle, he did not draw another.

Quick Ben sat back on his haunches and glanced over at Whiskeyjack. The sergeant was now facing them, his expression unreadable.

Tattersail wiped sweat from her brow with a grimy sleeve. 'It didn't work, then. You failed to do whatever it was you were trying to do.'

Quick Ben climbed to his feet. Kalam picked up the wrapped object and stepped close to Tattersail. The assassin's eyes were dark, penetrating as they searched her face.

Quick Ben spoke. 'Hold on to it, Sorceress. Take it back to your tent and unwrap it there. Above all, don't let Tayschrenn see it.'

Tattersail scowled. 'What? Just like that?' Her gaze fell on the object. 'I don't even know what I'd be accepting. Whatever it is, I don't like it.'

The girl spoke directly behind her in a voice that was sharp and accusing. 'I don't know what you've done, Wizard. I felt you keeping me away. That was unkind.'

Tattersail faced the girl, then glanced back at Quick Ben. *What is all this?* The black man's expression was glacial, but she saw a flicker around his eyes. Looked like fear.

Whiskeyjack rounded on the girl at her words. 'You got something to say about all this, recruit?' His tone was tight.

The girl's dark eyes slid to her sergeant. She shrugged, then walked away.

Kalam offered the object to Tattersail. 'Answers,' he said quietly, in a north Seven Cities accent, melodic and round. 'We all need answers, Sorceress. The High Mage killed your comrades. Look at us, we're all that's left of the Bridgeburners. Answers aren't easily ... attained. Will you pay the price?'

With a final glance at Hairlock's lifeless body – so brutally torn apart – and the lifeless stare of his eyes, she accepted the object. It felt light in her hands. Whatever was within the hide cocoon was slight in size; parts of it moved and against her grip she felt knobs and shafts of something hard. She

stared at the assassin's bearish face. 'I want,' she said slowly, 'to see Tayschrenn get what he deserves.'

'Then we're in agreement,' Kalam said, smiling. 'This is where it starts.'

Tattersail felt her stomach jump at that smile. *Woman, what's got into you?* She sighed. 'Done.' As she turned away to descend the slope and make her way back to the main camp, she caught the girl's eye. A chill rippled through her. The sorceress stopped. 'You, recruit,' she called. 'What's your name?'

The girl smiled as if at a private joke. 'Sorry.'

Tattersail grunted. It figured. She tucked the package under

an arm and staggered down the slope.

Sergeant Whiskey jack kicked at a helmet and watched as it tumbled and bounced down the hillside. He spun and glared at Quick Ben. 'It's done?'

The wizard's eyes darted to Sorry, then he nodded.

'You will draw unwarranted attention on our squad,' the young girl told Whiskeyjack. 'High Mage Tayschrenn will notice.'

The sergeant raised an eyebrow. 'Unwarranted attention? What the hell does that mean?'

Sorry made no reply.

Whiskeyjack bit back sharp words. What had Fiddler called her? An *uncanny bitch.* He'd said it to her face and she'd just stared him down with those dead, stony eyes. As much as he hated to admit it, Whiskeyjack shared the sapper's crude assessment. What made things even more disturbing, this fifteen-year-old girl had Quick Ben scared half out of his wits, and the wizard didn't want to talk about it. What had the Empire sent him?

His gaze swung back to Tattersail. She was crossing the killing field below. The ravens rose screaming from her path, and remained circling

overhead, their caws uneasy and frightened. The sergeant felt Kalam's solid presence at his side.

'Hood's Breath,' Whiskeyjack muttered. 'That sorceress seems an unholy terror as far as those birds are concerned.'

'Not her,' Kalam said. 'It's what she's carrying.'

Whiskeyjack scratched his beard, his eyes narrowing. 'This stinks. You sure it's necessary?'

Kalam shrugged.

'Whiskeyjack,' Quick Ben said, behind them, 'they *kept* us in the tunnels. Do you think the High Mage couldn't have guessed what would happen?'

The sergeant faced his wizard. A dozen paces beyond stood Sorry, well within hearing range. Whiskeyjack scowled at her, but said nothing.

After a moment of heavy silence, the sergeant turned his attention to the city. The last of the Moranth legions was marching beneath the West Gate's arch. Columns of black smoke rose from behind the battered, scarred walls. He knew something of the history of grim enmity between the Moranth and the citizens of the once Free City of Pale. Contested trade routes, two mercantile powers at each other's throat. And Pale won more often than not. At long last it seemed that the black-armoured warriors from beyond the western mountains, whose faces remained hidden behind the chitinous visors on their helms and who spoke in clicks and buzzes, were evening the score. Faintly, beyond the cries of carrion birds, came the wail of men, women and children dying beneath the sword.

'Sounds like the Empress is keeping her word with the Moranth,' Quick Ben said quietly. 'An hour of slaughter. I didn't think Dujek—'

'Dujek knows his orders,' Whiskeyjack cut in. 'And there's a High Mage taloned on his shoulder.'

'An hour,' Kalam repeated. "Then we clean up the mess.'

'Not our squad,' Whiskeyjack said. 'We've received new orders.'

The two men stared at their sergeant.

'And you still need convincing?' Quick Ben demanded. 'They're driving us into the ground. They mean to—'

'Enough!' Whiskeyjack barked. 'Not now. Kalam, find Fiddler. We need resupply from the Moranth. Round up the rest, Quick, and take Sorry with you. Join me outside the High Fist's tent in an hour.'

'And you?' Quick Ben asked. 'What are you going to do?'

The sergeant heard an ill-concealed yearning in the wizard's voice. The man needed a direction, or maybe confirmation that they were doing the right thing. A *little late for that.* Even so, Whiskeyjack felt a pang of regret – he couldn't give what Quick Ben wanted the most. He couldn't tell him that things would turn out for the best. He sank down on his haunches, his eyes on Pale. 'What am I going to do? I'm going to do some thinking, Quick Ben. I've been listening to you and Kalam, to Mallet and Fiddler, even Trotts has been jawing in my ear. Well, now it's my turn. So leave me be, Wizard, and take that damn girl with you.'

Quick Ben flinched, seeming to withdraw. Something in Whiskeyjack's words had made him very unhappy – or maybe everything.

The sergeant was too tired to worry about it. He had their new assignment to think over. Had he been a religious man, Whiskeyjack would have let blood in Hood's Bowl, calling upon the shades of his ancestors. As much as he hated to admit it, he shared the feeling among his squad: someone in the Empire wanted the Bridgeburners dead.

Pale was behind them now, the nightmare nothing but the taste of ashes in his mouth. Ahead lay their next destination: the legendary city of Darujhistan. Whiskeyjack had a premonition that a new nightmare was about to begin.

Down in the camp just beyond the last crest of denuded hills, horse-drawn carts loaded with wounded soldiers crowded the narrow aisles between the tent rows. All the precise order of the Malazan encampment had

disintegrated, and the air was febrile with soldiers screaming their pain, giving voice to horror.

Tattersail threaded her way around the dazed survivors, stepping across puddles of blood in the wagon-ruts, her eyes lingering on an obscene pile of amputated limbs outside the cutter tents. From the massive sprawl of the camp followers' slum of tents and shelters came a wailing dirge – a broken chorus of thousands of voices, the sound a chilling reminder that war was always a thing of grief.

In some military headquarters back in the Empire's capital of Unta, three thousand leagues distant, an anonymous aide would paint a red stroke across the 2nd Army on the active list, and then write in fine script beside it: Pale, *late winter, the 1163rd Year of Burn's Sleep.* Thus would the death of nine thousand men and women be noted. And then forgotten.

Tattersail grimaced. *Some of us won't forget.* The Bridgeburners harboured some frightening suspicions. The thought of challenging Tayschrenn in a direct confrontation appealed to her sense of outrage and – if the High Mage *had* killed Calot – her feeling of betrayal. But she knew that her emotions had a way of running away with her. A sorcery duel with the Empire's High Mage would buy her a quick passage to Hood's Gate. Self-righteous wrath had planted more corpses in the ground than an empire could lay claim to, and as Calot used to say: Shake your fist all you want but dead is dead.

She'd witnessed all too many scenes of death since she'd first joined the ranks of the Malazan Empire, but at least they couldn't be laid squarely at her feet. That was the difference, and it had been enough for a long time. *Not as 1 once was. I've spent twenty years washing the blood from my hands.* Right now, however, the scene that rose again and again behind her eyes was the empty armour on the hilltop, and it gnawed at her heart. Those men and women had been running to *her,* looking for protection against the horrors of the plain below. It had been a desperate act, a fatal one, but she understood it. Tayschrenn didn't care about them, but she did. She was one of their own. In past battles they'd fought like rabid dogs to keep enemy legions from killing her. This time, it was a mage war. Her territory.

Favours were traded in the 2nd. It's what kept everyone alive, and it was what had made the 2nd a legion of legend. Those soldiers had expectations, and they had the right to them. They'd come to her for salvation. And they died for it.

And *if I had sacrificed myself then? Cast my Warren's defences on to them instead of shielding my own hide?* She'd been surviving on instinct back then, and her instincts had had nothing to do with altruism. Those kind of people didn't live long in war.

Being alive, Tattersail concluded as she approached her tent, isn't the same as feeling good about it. She entered her tent and closed the flap behind her, then stood surveying her worldly possessions. Scant few, after two hundred and nineteen years of life. The oak chest containing her book of Thyr sorcery remained sealed by warding spells; the small collection of alchemical devices lay scattered on the tabletop beside her cot, like a child's toys abandoned in mid-game.

Amid the clutter sat her Deck of Dragons. Her gaze lingered on the reading cards before continuing its round. Everything looked different now, as if the chest, the alchemy, and her clothes all belonged to someone else: someone younger, someone still possessing a shred of vanity. Only the Deck – the Fatid – called out to her like an old friend.

Tattersail walked over to stand before it. With an absent gesture she set down the package given her by Kalam, then pulled out a stool from under the table. Sitting down, she reached for the Deck. She hesitated.

It had been months. Something had kept her away. Maybe Calot's death could have been foretold, and maybe that suspicion had been pacing in the darkness of her thoughts all this time. Pain and fear had been shaping her soul all her life, but her time with Calot had been another kind of shaping, something light, happy, pleasantly floating. She'd called it mere diversion.

'How's that for wilful denial?' She heard the bitterness in her tone and hated herself for it. Her old demons were back, laughing at the death of her illusions. *You refused the Deck once before, the night before Mock's throat was opened,, the night before Dancer and the man who would one day rule*

an Empire stole into your master's – your lover's – Hold. Would you deny that a pattern exists, woman?

Her vision blurry with memories she'd thought buried for ever, she looked down at the Deck, blinking rapidly. 'Do I want you to talk to me, old friend? Do I need your reminders, your wry confirmation that faith is for fools?'

A motion caught the corner of her eye. Whatever was inside the bound hide had moved. Lumps rose here and there, pushing against the seams. Tattersail stared. Then, her breath catching, she reached to it and set it in front of her. She withdrew a small dagger from her belt and began to cut the seams. The object within went still, as if awaiting the result of her efforts. She peeled back a sliced flap of hide.

' 'Sail,' said a familiar voice.

Her eyes widened as a wooden marionette, wearing bright yellow silk clothing, climbed out of the bag. Painted on its round face were features she recognized.

'Hairlock.'

'Good to see you again,' the marionette said, rising to its feet. It wobbled and held out artfully carved hands to regain balance. 'And the soul did shift,' he said, doffing his floppy hat and managing an unsteady bow.

Soul shifting. 'But that's been lost for centuries. Not even Tayschrenn—' She stopped, pursing her lips. Her thoughts raced.

'Later,' Hairlock said. He took a few steps, then bent his head forward to study his new body. 'Well,' he sighed, 'one mustn't quibble, must one?' He looked up and fixed painted eyes on the sorceress. 'You have to go to my tent before the thought occurs to Tayschrenn. I need my Book. You're part of this now. There's no turning back.'

'Part of what?'

Hairlock made no reply, having broken his uncanny stare. He lowered himself down to his knees. 'Thought I smelled a Deck,' he said.

Sweat ran in cold rivulets under Tattersail's arms. Hairlock had made her uneasy at the best of times, *but this* ... She could smell her own fear. That he'd swung his gaze from her made her grateful for small mercies. This was Elder Magic, Kurald Galain, if the legends were true, and it was deadly, vicious, raw and primal. The Bridgeburners had a reputation for being a mean crowd, but to walk the Warrens closest to Chaos was pure madness. Or desperation.

Almost of its own accord, her Thyr Warren opened and a surge of power filled her weary body. Her eyes snapped to the Deck.

Hairlock must have sensed it. 'Tattersail,' he whispered, amusement in his tone. 'Come. The Fatid calls to you. Read what is to be read.'

Profoundly disturbed by her own answering flush of excitement, Tattersail reluctantly reached for the Deck of Dragons. She saw her hand tremble as it closed on it. She shuffled slowly, feeling the chill of the lacquered wooden cards seep into her fingers and then her arms. 'I feel a storm raging in them already,' she said, trimming the Deck and setting it down on the tabletop.

Hairlock's answering laugh was eager and mean. 'First House sets the course. Quickly!'

She turned over the top card. Her breath caught. 'Knight of Dark.'

Hairlock sighed. 'The Lord of Night rules this game. Of course.'

Tattersail studied the painted figure. The face remained blurred as it always did; the Knight was naked, his skin jet black. From the hips up he was human, heavily muscled, holding aloft a black two-handed sword that trailed smoky, ethereal chains drifting off into the background's empty darkness. His lower body was draconian, its armoured scales black, paling to grey at the belly. As always, she saw something new, something she had never seen before that pertained to the moment. There was a shape suspended in the darkness above the Knight's head: she could only detect it on the edge of her vision, a vague hint that vanished when she focused on the place itself. *Of course, you never give up the truth so easily, do you!*

'Second card,' Hairlock urged, crouching close to the playing field inscribed on the tabletop.

She flipped the second card. 'Oponn.' The two-faced Jester of Chance.

'Hood's Curse on their meddling ways,' Hairlock growled.

The Lady held the upright position, her male twin's bemused stare upside down at the card's foot. Thus the thread of luck that pulled back rather than pushed forward – the thread of success. The Lady's expression seemed soft, almost tender, a new facet marking how things now balanced. A second heretofore unseen detail caught Tattersail's intense study. Where the Lord's right hand reached up to touch the Lady's left a tiny silver disc spanned the space between them. The sorceress leaned forward, squinting. A coin, and on the face a male head. She blinked. No, female. Then male, then female. She sat back suddenly. The coin was spinning.

'Next!' Hairlock demanded. 'You are too slow!'

Tattersail saw that the marionette was paying no attention to the card Oponn, and had in fact probably given it only sufficient notice to identify it. She drew a deep breath. Hairlock and the Bridgeburners were tied up in this, she knew that instinctively, but her own role was as yet undecided. With these two cards, she already knew more than they did. It still wasn't much, but it might be enough to keep her alive in what was to come. She released her breath all at once, reached forward and slammed a palm down on the Deck.

Hairlock jumped, then whirled to her. 'You hold on this?' he raged. 'You hold on the Fool? The second card? Absurd! Play on, woman!'

'No,' Tattersail replied, sweeping the two cards into her hands and returning them to the Deck. 'I've chosen to hold. And there's nothing you can do about it.' She rose.

'Bitch! I can kill you in the blink of an eye! Here and now!'

'Fine,' Tattersail said. 'A good excuse for missing Tayschrenn's debriefing. By all means proceed, Hairlock.' Crossing her arms, she waited.

The marionette snarled. 'No,' he said. 'I have need of you. And you despise Tayschrenn even more than I.' He cocked his head, reconsidering his last words, then barked a laugh. 'Thus I am assured there will be no betrayal.'

Tattersail thought about that. 'You are right,' she said. She turned and walked to the tent flap. Her hand closed on the rough canvas, then she stopped. 'Hairlock, how well can you hear?'

'Well enough,' the marionette growled behind her.

'Do you hear anything, then?' A *spinning coin?*

'Camp sounds, is all. Why, what do you hear?'

Tattersail smiled. Without answering she pulled aside the tent flap and went outside. As she headed towards the command tent, a strange hope sang through her.

She'd never held Oponn as an ally. Calling on luck in anything was sheer idiocy. The first House she had placed, Darkness, touched her hand ice-cold, loud with the crashing waves of violence and power run amok – and yet an odd flavour there, something like salvation. The Knight could be enemy or ally, or more likely neither. Just out there, unpredictable, self-absorbed. But Oponn rode the warrior's shadow, leaving House Dark tottering on the edge, suspended in a place between night and day. More than anything else, it had been Oponn's spinning coin that had demanded her choice to hold.

Hairlock heard nothing. *Wonderful.*

Even now, as she approached the command tent, the faint sound continued in her head, as it would for some time, she believed. The coin spun, and spun. Oponn whirled two faces to the cosmos, but it was the Lady's bet. Spin *on, silver. Spin on.*

CHAPTER THREE

Thelomen Tartheno Tobbkai...
find the names of a people
so reluctant to fade
into oblivion ...
Their legend rots
ray cynical cast and blights
my eyes with bright glory ...
'Cross not the loyal cage
embracing their unassailable heart...

... Cross not these stolid menhirs,
ever loyal to the earth.'
Thelomen Tartheno Toblakai...
Still standing, these towering pillars
mar the gelid scape
of my mind ...

Gothos' Folly (11.iv)
Gothos (b.?)

The imperial trireme carved the deep-sea troughs like a relentless axe-blade, sails stretched and spars creaking under the steady wind. Captain Ganoes Paran remained in his cabin. He had long since grown tired of scanning the eastern horizon for the first sighting of land. It would come, and it would come soon.

He leaned against the sloping wall opposite his bunk, watching the lanterns sway and idly tossing his dagger into the lone table's centre pole, which was now studded with countless tiny holes.

A cool musty brush of air swept across his face and he turned to see Topper emerge from the Imperial Warren. It had been two years since he'd

last seen the Claw Master. 'Hood's Breath, man,' Paran said, 'can't you find another colour of cloth? This perverse love of green must surely be curable.'

The tall half-blood Tiste Andii seemed to be wearing the same clothes as the last time Paran had seen him: green wool, green leather. Only the countless rings spearing his long fingers showed any splash of contrary colour. The Claw Master had arrived in a sour mood and Paran's opening words had not improved it. 'You imagine I enjoy such journeys, Captain? Seeking out a ship on the ocean is a challenge of sorcery few could manage.'

'Makes you a reliable messenger, then,' Paran muttered.

'I see you've made no effort to improve on courtesy, Captain – I admit I understand nothing of the Adjunct's faith in you.'

'Don't lose sleep over it, Topper. Now you've found me, what is the message?'

The man scowled. 'She's with the Bridgeburners. Outside Pale.'

'The siege continues? How old is your information?'

'Less than a week, which is as long as I've been hunting you. In any case,' he continued, 'the deadlock is about to be broken.'

Paran grunted. Then he frowned. 'Which squad?'

'You know them all?'

'Yes,' Paran asserted.

Topper's scowl deepened, then he raised a hand and began examining his rings. 'Whiskeyjack's. She's one of his recruits.'

Paran closed his eyes. It should not have surprised him. The *gods are playing with me. Question is, which gods? Oh, Whiskey jack. You once commanded an army, back when Laseen was named Surly, back when you could have listened to your companion, when you could have made a choice. You could've stopped Surly.* Hell, perhaps *you could have stopped me. But now you command a squad, just a squad, and she's the Empress.*

And me? I'm a fool who followed his dream, and now all 1 desire is its end. He opened his eyes and regarded Topper. 'Whiskeyjack. The War of Seven Cities: through the breach at Aren, the Holy Desert Raraku, Pan'potsun, Nathilog ...'

'All in the Emperor's time, Paran.'

'So,' Paran said, 'I'm to take command of Whiskeyjack's squad. The mission will take us to Darujhistan, to the city of cities.'

'Your recruit is showing her powers,' Topper said, grimacing. 'She's corrupted the Bridgeburners, possibly even Dujek Onearm and the entire Second and Third Armies on Genabackis.'

'You can't be serious. Besides, my concern is with the recruit. With her. Only her. The Adjunct agrees we've waited long enough. Now you're telling me we've waited too long? I can't believe Dujek's about to become a renegade – not Dujek. Not Whiskeyjack either.'

'You are to proceed as planned, but I have been instructed to remind you that secrecy is paramount, now more than ever. An agent of the Claw will contact you once you reach Pale. Trust no one else. Your recruit's found her weapon, and with it she means to strike at the heart of the Empire. Failure cannot be considered.' Topper's odd eyes glinted. 'If you now feel unequal to the task...'

Paran studied the man standing before him. *If it's as bad as you describe, why not send in a hand of Claw assassins?*

The man sighed, as if he'd somehow heard Paran's silent question. 'A god is using her, Captain. She won't die easily. The plan for dealing with her has required ... adjustments. Expansion, in fact. Additional threats must be taken care of, but these are threads already woven. Do as you have been commanded. All risk must be removed if we are to take Darujhistan, and the Empress wants Darujhistan. She also feels it is time for Dujek Onearm to be ...' he smiled '... disarmed.'

'Why?'

'He has a following. It's still held that the Emperor had old Onearm in mind as his heir.'

Paran snorted. 'The Emperor planned to rule for ever, Topper. This suspicion of Laseen's is plain ridiculous and persists only because it justifies her paranoia.'

'Captain,' Topper said quietly, 'greater men than you have died for less. The Empress expects obedience of her servants, and demands loyalty.'

'Any reasonable ruler would have the expectation and the demand the other way round.'

Topper's mouth thinned to a pale line. 'Assume command of the squad, stay close to the recruit but otherwise do nothing to make her suspicious of you. Once in place you are to wait. Understood?'

Paran looked away, his gaze finding the porthole. Beyond was blue sky. There were too many omissions, half-truths and outright lies in this ... this *chaotic mess. How will I play it, when the time comes? The recruit must die. At least that much is certain. But the rest? Whiskeyjack, 1 remember you, you stood tall then, and in my dreams I never imagined this growing nightmare. Will I have your blood on my hands when all this is done?* At the very heart of things, he realized, he no longer knew who was the ultimate betrayer in all this, if a betrayer there must be. Was the Empire the Empress? Or was it something else, a legacy, an ambition, a vision at the far end of peace and wealth for all? Or was it a beast that could not cease devouring? Darujhistan – the greatest city in the world. Would it come to the Empire in flames? Was there wisdom in opening its gates? Within the troubled borders of the Malazan Empire, people lived in such peace as their ancestors had never imagined; and if not for the Claw, for the endless wars in distant lands, there would be freedom as well. Had this been the Emperor's dream at the very beginning? Did it matter any more?

'Are my instructions understood, Captain?'

He glanced over at the man and waved a hand. 'Well enough.'

Snarling, Topper spread wide his arms. The Imperial Warren yawned behind him. He stepped back and was gone.

Paran leaned forward, his head in his hands.

It was the Season of Currents and in the port city of Genabaris the heavy Malazan transports rocked and twisted, straining at their ropes like massive beasts. The piers, unused to such gargantuan craft moored alongside them, creaked ominously with every wayward, savage pull on the bollards.

Crates and cloth-wrapped bundles crowded the yards, supplies fresh in from the Seven Cities and destined for the front lines. Supply clerks clambered over them like monkeys, hunting sigils of identification and chattering to each other over the heads of dockmen and soldiers.

The agent leaned against a crate at the foot of the pier, his burly arms crossed and his small, narrow eyes fixed on the officer sitting on a bundle some thirty yards further down the pier. Neither had moved in the last hour.

The agent was having a hard time convincing himself that this was the man he'd been sent to retrieve. He looked awfully young, and as green as the rancid water of this bay. His uniform still bore its maker's chalk lines, and the leather grip of his longsword showed not a single sweat-stain. He had the stink of nobility about him like a perfumed cloud. And for the past hour he'd just been sitting there, hands in lap, shoulders hunched, watching like some stupid cow the frenzied activity swirling around him. Though he ranked captain, not a single soldier even bothered to salute him – the stink wasn't subtle.

The Adjunct must have been knocked on her head during that last assassination attempt on the Empress. It was the only possible explanation for this farce of a man rating the kind of service the agent was about to deliver. In *person*, *yet.* These days, he concluded sourly, the whole show was being run by idiots.

With a loud sigh, the agent pushed himself upright and sauntered over to the officer.

The man didn't even know he had company until the agent stepped in front of him, then he looked up.

The agent did some quick rethinking. Something in this man's gaze was dangerous. There was a glitter there, buried deep, that made the man's eyes seem older than the rest of his face. 'Name?' The agent's question was a strained grunt.

'Took your time about it,' the captain said, rising.

A tall *bastard, too.* The agent scowled. He hated tall bastards. 'Who're you waiting for, Captain?'

The man looked up the pier. 'The waiting's over. Let's walk. I'll just take it on faith you know where we're going.' He reached down and retrieved a duffel bag, then took the lead.

The agent moved up beside the captain. 'Fine,' he growled. 'Be that way.' They left the pier and the agent turned them up the first street on the right. 'A Green Quorl came in last night. You'll be taken directly to Cloud Forest, and from there a Black will take you into Pale.'

The captain gave the agent a blank stare.

'You never heard of Quorls?'

'No. I assume they're a means of transportation. Why else would I be removed from a ship a thousand leagues distant from Pale?'

'The Moranth use them, and we're using the Moranth.' The agent scowled to himself. 'Using them a lot, these days. The Green do most of the courier stuff, and moving people around like you and me, but the Black are stationed in Pale, and the different clans don't like to mix. The Moranth are made up of a bunch of clans, got colours for names, and wear them too. Nobody gets confused that way.'

'And I'm to ride with a Green, on a Quorl?'

'You got it, Captain.'

They headed up a narrow street. Malazan guards milled around every crossing, hands on their weapons.

The captain returned a salute from one such squad. 'Having trouble with insurrections?' he asked.

'Insurrections, yeah. Trouble, no.'

'Let's see if I understand you correctly.' The captain's tone was stiff. 'Instead of delivering me by ship to a point nearest Pale, I'm to ride overland with a bunch of half-human barbarians who smell like grasshoppers and dress like them, too. And this way, no one will notice, especially since it'll take us a year to get to Pale and by then everything will have gone all to hell. Correct so far?'

Grinning, the agent shook his head. Despite his hatred for tall men or, rather, men taller than himself, he felt his guard going down. At least this one talked straight – and, for a noble, that was pretty impressive. Maybe Lorn still had the old stuff after all. 'You said overland? Well, hell, yes, Captain. Way overland.' He stopped at a nondescript doorway and turned to the man. 'Quorls, you see, they fly. They got wings. Four in fact. And you can see right through every one of them, and if you're of a mind you can poke your finger through one of those wings. Only don't do it when you're a quarter-mile up, right? 'Cause it may be a long way down but it'll seem awfully fast at the time. You hear me, Captain?' He opened the door. Beyond rose a staircase.

The man's face had lost its colour. 'So much for intelligence reports,' he muttered.

The agent's grin widened. 'We see them before you do. Life's on a need-to-know. Remember that, Captain ... ?'

The man's smile was the only answer he gave.

They entered and closed the door behind them.

A young marine intercepted Tattersail as she made her way across the compound in what was now Empire headquarters in Pale. The boy's face had bewilderment written all over it, and he opened his mouth a few times before any words came out.

'Sorceress?'

She stopped. The thought of having Tayschrenn wait a little longer appealed to her. 'What is it, soldier?'

The marine stole a glance over one shoulder, then said, 'The guards, Sorceress. They've got something of a problem. They sent me to—'

'Who? Which guards? Take me to them.'

'Yes, Sorceress.'

She followed the marine around the nearest corner of the main building, where the compound wall ran close, creating a narrow passage running the building's length. At the far end knelt a figure, his bare head bowed. Beside him was a large, lumpy burlap sack, covered in brown stains. Clouds of flies swarmed around both the man and the sack.

The marine halted and turned to the sorceress. 'He still hasn't moved. The guards keep getting sick when they patrol through here.'

Tattersail stared at the huddled man, a sudden welling of tears behind her eyes. Ignoring the marine, she strode into the aisle. The stench hit her like a wall. Damn, she thought, he's been here since the battle. Five days. The sorceress came closer. Though Bellurdan knelt, his head came near to her own height. The Thelomen High Mage still wore what was left of his battle garb, the ragged strips of fur scorched and torn, the rough weave of fragments of tunic stained with blood. As she arrived to stop before him, she saw that his neck and face were covered in burn blisters, and most of his hair was gone.

'You look terrible, Bellurdan,' she said.

The giant's head slowly turned. Red-rimmed eyes focused on her face. 'Ah,' he rumbled. 'Tattersail.' His exhausted smile cracked the charred flesh

of one cheek. The wound gaped red and dry.

That smile almost broke her down. 'You need healing, old friend.' Her gaze flicked to the burlap sack. Its surface crawled with flies. 'Come on. Nightchill would bite your head off if she could see you now.' She felt a trembling steal into her, but grimly pressed on. 'We'll take care of her, Bellurdan. You and me. But we'll need our strength to do that.'

The Thelomen shook his head slowly. 'I choose this, Tattersail. The scars without are the scars within.' He drew a deep breath. 'I will survive these wounds. And I alone will raise my love's barrow. But the time is not yet right.' He laid a massive hand on the sack. 'Tayschrenn has given me leave to do this. Will you do the same?'

Tattersail was shocked to feel the surge of anger rising up in her. 'Tayschrenn gave you leave, did he?' To her own ears her voice sounded brutal, a harsh grating of sarcasm. She saw Bellurdan flinch and seem to withdraw, and a part of her wanted to wail, to throw her arms around the giant and weep, but rage possessed her. 'That bastard killed Nightchill, Bellurdan! The Moon's lord had neither the time nor the inclination to raise demons. Think about it! Tayschrenn had the time to prepare—'

'No!' The Thelomen's voice thundered down the aisle. He surged to his feet and Tattersail stepped back. The giant looked ready to tear down the walls, a desperate fire in his eyes. His hands closed into fists. Then his glare fixed on her. He seemed to freeze. All at once his shoulders slumped, his hands opened, and his eyes dimmed. 'No,' he said again, this time in a tone filled with sorrow. 'Tayschrenn is our protector. As he has always been, Tattersail. Remember the very beginning? The Emperor was mad, but Tayschrenn stood at his side. He shaped the Empire's dream and so opposed the Emperor's nightmare. We underestimated the Lord of Moon's Spawn, that is all.'

Tattersail stared up at Bellurdan's ravaged face. The memory of Hairlock's torn body returned to her. There was an echo there, but she couldn't quite catch it. 'I remember the beginning,' she said softly, doing some searching of her own. The memories remained sharp, but whatever thread there was that connected then to now still eluded her. She wanted desperately to talk

to Quick Ben, but she had seen nothing of the Bridgeburners since the day of the battle. They'd left her with Hairlock, and that puppet scared her more and more with every passing day. Particularly now that he'd found a grudge to hold on to – the scene with the Deck of Dragons still smarted – and he worked it by keeping her in the dark. 'The Emperor had a knack for gathering the right people around him,' she continued. 'But he wasn't a fool. He knew the betrayal would come from that group. What made us the right people was our power. I remember, Bellurdan.' She shook her head. 'The Emperor's gone, but the power's still here.'

Tattersail's breath caught. 'And that's it,' she said, half to herself. 'Tayschrenn's the thread.'

'The Emperor was insane,' Bellurdan said. 'Else he would have protected himself better.'

Tattersail frowned at that. The Thelomen had a point. Like she'd just said, that old man wasn't a fool. So what had happened? 'I'm sorry. We must talk later. The High Mage has summoned me. Bellurdan, will we talk later?'

The giant nodded. 'As you wish. Soon I will depart to raise Nightchill's barrow. Far out on the Rhivi Plain, I think.'

Tattersail glanced back up the aisle. The marine still stood there, shifting from one foot to the other. 'Bellurdan, would you mind if I cast a sealing spell on her remains?'

His eyes clouded and he looked down at the sack. 'The guards are unhappy, it's true.' He thought for a moment, then said, 'Yes, Tattersail. You may do that.'

'It smells bad from here to the throne,' Kalam said, his scarred face twisted with worry. He sat crouched on his haunches, absently scratching the lines of a web on the ground with his dagger, then looked up at his sergeant.

Whiskeyjack eyed Pale's stained walls, the muscles of his jaw bunching beneath his beard. 'The last time I stood on this hill,' he said, his gaze

narrowing, 'it was crowded with armour. And a mage and a half.' He was silent for a time, then he sighed. 'Go on, Corporal.'

Kalam nodded. 'I pulled some old threads,' he said, squinting against the harsh morning light. 'Somebody high up has us marked. Could be the court itself, or maybe the nobility – there's rumours they're back at it behind the scenes.' He grimaced. 'And now we've got some new captain from Unta eager to get our throats cut. Four captains in the last three years, not one worth his weight in salt.'

Quick Ben stood ten feet away, at the hill's crest, his arms crossed. He now spoke. 'You heard the plan. Come on, Whiskeyjack. That man slid straight out of the palace and into our laps on a stream of—'

'Quiet,' Whiskeyjack muttered. 'I'm thinking.'

Kalam and Quick Ben exchanged glances.

A long minute passed. On the road below troop wagons rattled in the ruts leading into the city. Remnants of the 5th and 6th Armies, already battered, almost broken, by Caladan Brood and the Crimson Guard. Whiskeyjack shook his head. The only force intact was the Moranth, and they seemed determined to field only the Black regiments, using the Green for lifts and drops – and where the hell was the Gold he'd been hearing so much about? *Damn those unhuman bastards anyway.* Pale's gutters still ran red from their hour of retribution. Once the burial shifts were through, there'd be a few more hills outside the city's walls. Big ones.

There would be nothing to mark thirteen hundred dead Bridgeburners, though. The worms didn't need to travel far to feast on those bodies. What chilled the sergeant to his bones was the fact that, apart from the few survivors, nobody had made a serious effort to save them. Some low-ranking officer had delivered Tayschrenn's commiserations on those lost in the line of duty, then had unloaded a wagonload of tripe about heroism and sacrifice. His audience of thirty-nine stone-faced soldiers had looked on without a word. The officer was found dead in his room two hours later, expertly garotted. The mood was bad – nobody in the regiment would have

even thought of something so ugly five years ago. But now they didn't blink at the news.

Garotte – sounds like Claw work. Kalam had suggested it was a set-up, an elaborate frame to discredit what was left of the Bridgeburners. Whiskeyjack was sceptical.

He tried to clear his thoughts. If there was a pattern it would be a simple one, simple enough to pass by unnoticed. But exhaustion seeped in like a thick haze behind his eyes. He took a deep lungful of the morning air. 'The new recruit?' he asked.

Kalam rose from his haunches with a grunt. A faraway and long-ago look entered his eyes. 'Maybe,' he said finally. 'Pretty young for a Claw, though.'

'I never believed in pure evil before Sorry showed up,' Quick Ben said. 'But you're right, she's awfully young. How long are they trained before they're sent out?'

Kalam shrugged uneasily. 'Fifteen years minimum. Mind you, they get them young. Five or six.'

'Could be magery involved, making her look younger than she is,' Quick Ben said. 'High-level stuff, but within Tayschrenn's abilities.'

'Seems too obvious,' Whiskeyjack muttered. 'Call it bad upbringing.'

Quick Ben snorted. 'Don't tell me you believe that, Whiskeyjack.'

The sergeant's face tightened. 'The subject's closed on Sorry. And don't tell me what I think, Wizard.' He faced Kalam. 'All right. You think the Empire's into killing its own these days. You think Laseen's cleaning her house, maybe? Or someone close to her? Getting rid of certain people. Fine. Tell me why.'

'The old guard,' Kalam replied immediately. 'Everyone still loyal to the Emperor's memory.'

'Doesn't wash,' Whiskeyjack said. 'We're all dying off anyway. We don't need Laseen's help. Apart from Dujek there's not a man in this army here

who even knows the Emperor's name, and nobody'd give a damn in any case. He's dead. Long live the Empress.'

'She ain't got the patience to wait it out,' Quick Ben said.

Kalam nodded agreement. 'She's losing momentum as it is. Things used to be better – it's that memory she wants dead.'

'Hairlock's our snake in the hole,' Quick Ben said with a sharp nod. 'It'll work, Whiskeyjack. I know what I'm doing on this one.'

'We do it the way the Emperor would have,' Kalam added. 'We turn the game. We do our own house-cleaning.'

Whiskeyjack raised a hand. 'All right. Now be quiet. You're both sounding too damn rehearsed.' He paused. 'It's a theory. A complicated one. Who's in the know and who isn't?' He scowled at Quick Ben's expression. 'Right, that's Hairlock's task. But what happens when you come face to face with some-one big, powerful and mean?'

'Like Tayschrenn?' The wizard grinned.

'Right. I'm sure you've got an answer. Let's see if I can work it out myself. You look for someone even nastier. You make a deal and you set things up, and if we're quick enough we'll come out smelling of roses. Am I close, Wizard?'

Kalam snorted his amusement.

Quick Ben looked away. 'Back in the Seven Cities, before the Empire showed up—'

'Back in the Seven Cities is back in the Seven Cities,' Whiskeyjack said. 'Hell, I led the company chasing you across the desert, remember? I know how you work, Quick. And I know you're damn good at this. But I also recall that you were the only one of your cabal to come out alive back then. And this time?'

The wizard seemed hurt by Whiskeyjack's words. His lips thinned to a straight line.

The sergeant sighed. 'All right. We go with it. Start things rolling. And pull that sorceress all the way in. We'll need her if Hairlock breaks his chains.'

'And Sorry?' Kalam asked.

Whiskeyjack hesitated. He knew the question behind that question. Quick Ben was the squad's brains, but Kalam was their killer. Both made him uneasy with their single-minded devotion to their respective talents. 'Leave her alone,' he said at last. 'For now.'

Kalam and Quick Ben sighed, sharing a grin behind their sergeant's back.

'Just don't get cocky,' Whiskeyjack said drily.

The grins faded.

The sergeant's gaze returned to the wagons entering the city. Two riders approached. 'All right,' he said. 'Mount up. Here comes our reception committee.' The riders were from his squad, Fiddler and Sorry.

'You think the new captain's arrived?' Kalam asked, as he climbed into his saddle. His roan mare turned her head and snapped at him. He growled in return. A moment later the two long-time companions settled down into their mutual mistrust.

Whiskeyjack looked on, amused. 'Probably. Let's head down to them. Anybody up on the wall watching us might be getting antsy.' Then his humour fell away. They had, indeed, just turned the game. And the timing couldn't have been worse. He knew the full extent of their next mission, and in that he knew more than either Quick Ben or Kalam. There was no point in complicating things even further, though. *They'll find out soon enough.*

Tattersail stood half a dozen feet behind High Mage Tayschrenn. The Malazan banners snapped in the wind, the spars creaking above the smoke-stained turret, but here in the shelter of the wall the air was calm. On the western horizon across from her rose the Moranth Mountains, reaching a mangled arm northward to Genabaris. As the range swept southward it

joined the Tahlyn in a jagged line stretching a thousand leagues into the east. Off to her right lay the flat yellow-grassed Rhivi Plain.

Tayschrenn leaned on a merlon looking down on the wagons rolling into the city. From below rose the groans of oxen and shouting soldiers. The High Mage hadn't moved or said a word in some minutes. Off to his left waited a small wood table, its surface scarred and pitted and crowded with runes cut deep into the oak. Peculiar dark stains blotted the surface here and there.

Knots of tension throbbed in Tattersail's shoulders. Meeting Bellurdan had shaken her, and she didn't feel up to what was to come.

'Bridgeburners,' the High Mage muttered.

Startled, the sorceress frowned, then stepped up to stand beside Tayschrenn. Descending from a hill off to the right, a hill she knew intimately, rode a party of soldiers. Even from this distance she recognized four of them: Quick Ben, Kalam, Whiskeyjack and that recruit, Sorry. The fifth rider was a short, wiry man, who had sapper written all over him. 'Oh?' she said, feigning lack of interest.

'Whiskeyjack's squad,' Tayschrenn said. He turned his full gaze on the sorceress. 'The same squad you spoke with immediately following the Moon's retreat.' The High Mage smiled, then clapped Tattersail's shoulder. 'Come. I require a Reading. Let's begin.' He walked over to stand before the table. 'Oponn's strands are twisting a peculiar maze, the influence snares me again and again.' He turned his back to the wall and sat down on a crenel, then looked up. 'Tattersail,' he said soberly, 'in matters of Empire, I am the servant of the Empress.'

Tattersail recalled their argument at the debriefing. Nothing had been resolved. 'Perhaps I should take my complaints to her, then.'

Tayschrenn's brows rose. 'I take that as sarcastic'

'You do?'

The High Mage said, stiffly, 'I do, and be thankful for it, woman.'

Tattersail pulled out her Deck and held it against her stomach, running her fingers over the top card. Cool, a feeling of great weight and darkness. She set the Deck in the table's centre, then lowered her bulk slowly into a kneeling position. Her gaze locked with Tayschrenn's. 'Shall we begin?'

'Tell me of the Spinning Coin.'

Tattersail's breath caught. She could not move.

'First card,' Tayschrenn commanded.

With an effort she expelled the air from her lungs in a hissing sigh. Damn him, she thought. An echo of laughter sounded in her head, and she realized that someone, something, had opened the way. An Ascendant was reaching through her, its presence cool and amused, almost fickle. Her eyes shut of their own accord, and she reached for the first card. She flipped it almost haphazardly to her right. Eyes still closed, she felt herself smile. 'An unaligned card: Orb. Judgement and true sight.' The second card she tossed to the left side of the field. 'Virgin, High House Death. Here scarred and blindfolded, with blood on her hands.'

Faintly, as if from a great distance away, came the sound of horses, thundering closer, now beneath her, as if the earth had swallowed them. Then the sound rose anew, behind her. She felt herself nod. *The recruit.* 'The blood on her hands is not her own, the crime not its own. The cloth against her eyes is wet.'

She slapped the third card immediately in front of her. Behind her lids an image formed. It left her cold and frightened. 'Assassin, High House Shadow. The Rope, a count of knots unending, the Patron of Assassins is in this game.' For a moment she thought she heard the howling of Hounds. She laid a hand on the fourth card and felt a thrill of recognition ripple through her, followed by something like false modesty. 'Oponn, Lady's head high, Lord's low.' She picked it up and set it down opposite Tayschrenn.

There's your block. She smiled to herself. *Chew on it awhile, High Mage. The Lady regards you with disgust.* Tattersail knew he must be burning with questions, but he wouldn't speak them. There was too much power behind

this opening. Had he sensed the Ascendant's presence? She wondered if it scared him.

'The Coin,' she heard herself say, 'spins on, High Mage. Its face looks upon many, a handful perhaps, and here is their card.' She set the fifth card to Oponn's right, edges touching. 'Another unaligned card: Crown. Wisdom and justice, as it is upright. Around it a fair city's walls, lit by flames of gas, blue and green.' She pondered. 'Yes, Darujhistan, the last Free City.'

The way closed, the Ascendant withdrawing as if bored. Tattersail's eyes opened, an unexpected warmth comforting her weary body. 'Into Oponn's maze,' she said, amused at the truth hidden in that statement. 'I can take it no further, High Mage.'

Tayschrenn's breath gusted out and he leaned back. 'You've gone far past what I've managed, Sorceress.' His face was drawn as he looked at her. 'I'm impressed with your source, though not pleased with its message.' He frowned, planting his elbows on his knees and steepling his long-fingered hands before his face. 'This Spinning Coin, ever echoing. There's the Jester's humour in this shaping – even now I feel we are being misled. Death's Virgin, a likely deceit.'

It was now Tattersail's turn to be impressed. The High Mage was an Adept, then. Had he, too, heard the laughter punctuating the laying of the field? She hoped not. 'You might be right,' she said. 'The Virgin's face is ever changing – it could be anyone. Can't say the same for Oponn, or the Rope's.' She nodded. 'A very possible deception,' she said, pleased to be conversing with an equal – a truth that made her grimace inwardly. *It's always better when hatred and outrage stay pure, uncompromised.*

'I would hear your thoughts,' Tayschrenn said.

Tattersail started, shied from the High Mage's steady gaze. She began collecting the cards. Would it hurt to offer some explanation? *If anything, it will leave him even more rattled than he already is.* 'Deception is the Patron Assassin's forte. I sensed nothing of his presumed master, Shadowthrone himself. Makes me suspect the Rope is on his own here. Beware the Assassin, High Mage, if anything his games are even more subtle than

Shadowthrone's. And while Oponn plays their own version, it remains the same game, and that game is being played out in our world. The Twins of Luck have no control in Shadow's Realm, and Shadow is a Warren known for slipping its boundaries. For breaking the rules.'

'True enough,' Tayschrenn said, rising to his feet with a grunt. 'The birth of that bastard realm has ever troubled me.'

'It's young yet,' Tattersail said. She picked up her Deck and returned it to the pocket inside her cloak. 'Its final shaping is still centuries away, and it may never happen. Recall other new Houses that ended up dying a quick death.'

'This one stinks of too much power.' Tayschrenn returned to his study of the Moranth Mountains. 'My gratitude,' he said, as Tattersail went to the steps leading down into the city, 'is worth something, I hope. In any case, Sorceress, you have it.'

Tattersail hesitated at the landing, then began the descent. He'd be less magnanimous if he found out that she had just misled him. She could guess the Virgin's identity. Her thoughts travelled back to the moment of the Virgin's appearance. The horses she had heard, passing beneath, hadn't been an illusion. Whiskeyjack's squad had just entered the city, through the gate below. And among them rode Sorry. Coincidence? Maybe, but she didn't think so. The Spinning Coin had faintly wobbled at that instant, then its ringing returned. Though she heard it in her mind day and night, it had become almost second nature, and Tattersail found she had to concentrate to find it. But she'd caught the nudge, felt the pitch change and sensed a brief instant of uncertainty.

Death's Virgin, and the Assassin of High House Shadow. There was a connection there, somehow, and it bothered Oponn. Obviously, everything remained in a flux. 'Terrific,' she muttered, as she reached the bottom of the staircase.

She saw the young marine who had approached her earlier. He stood in a line of recruits in the centre of the compound. No commanding officer was in sight. Tattersail called the boy over.

'Yes, Sorceress?' he asked, as he arrived to stand at attention in front of her.

'What are you all standing around for, soldier?'

'We're about to be issued our weapons. The staff sergeant's gone to bring the wagon round.'

Tattersail nodded. 'I have a task for you. I'll see that you get your weapons – but not the tinny ones your friends are about to receive. If a superior officer questions your absence, refer him to me.'

'Yes, Sorceress.'

A pang of regret hit Tattersail upon meeting the boy's bright, eager gaze. Chances were, he'd be dead within a few months. The Empire had many crimes staining its banner, but this was the worst of them. She sighed. 'Deliver, in person, this message to Sergeant Whiskeyjack, Bridgeburners. The fat lady with the spells wants to talk. You have it, soldier?'

The boy blanched.

'Let's hear it.'

The marine repeated the message in a deadpan tone.

Tattersail smiled. 'Very good. Now run along, and don't forget to get an answer from him. I'll be in my quarters.'

Captain Paran swung around for a last look at the Black Moranth. The squad had just reached the plateau's crest. He watched until they disappeared from view, then shifted his gaze back to the city in the east.

From this distance, with the wide, flat plain in between, Pale seemed peaceful enough, although the ground outside the walls was studded with black basaltic rubble and the memory of smoke and fire clung to the air. Along the wall scaffolding rose in places, tiny figures crowding the frameworks. They appeared to be rebuilding huge gaps in the stonework. From the north gate a sluggish stream of wagons wound out towards the

hills, the air above them filled with crows. Along the edge of those hills ran a line of mounds too regular to be natural.

He'd heard the rumours, here and there. Five dead mages, two of them High Mages. The 2nd's losses enough to fire speculation that it would be merged with the 5th and the 6th to form a new regiment. And Moon's Spawn had retreated south, across the Tahlyn Mountains to Lake Azur, trailing smoke, drifting and leaning to one side like a spent thunder-head. But one tale reached into the captain's thoughts deeper than all the rest: the Bridgeburners were gone. Some stories said killed to a man; others insisted that a few squads had made it out of the tunnels before the collapse.

Paran was frustrated. He'd been among Moranth for days. The uncanny warriors hardly ever spoke, and when they did it was to each other in that incomprehensible tongue of theirs. All of his information was out of date, and that put him in an unfamiliar position. Mind you, he thought, since Genabaris it had been one unfamiliar situation after another.

So here he was, on the waiting end of things once again. He readjusted his duffel bag and was preparing for a long wait when he saw a horseman top the far plateau's crest. The man had an extra mount with him, and he rode straight for the captain.

He sighed. Dealing with the Claw always grated. They were so damn smug. With the exception of that man in Genabaris, none seemed to like him much. It had been a long time since he'd known someone he could call a friend. Over two years, in fact.

The rider arrived. Seeing him up close, Paran took an involuntary step back. Half the man's face had been burned away. A patch covered the right eye and the man held his head at an odd angle. The man flashed a ghastly grin, then dismounted.

'You're the one, huh?' he asked in a rasping voice.

'Is it true about the Bridgeburners?' Paran demanded. 'Wiped out?'

'More or less. Five squads left, or thereabouts. About forty in all.' His left eye squinted and he reached up to adjust his battered helmet. 'Didn't know

where you'd be heading before. Do now. You're Whiskeyjack's new captain, huh?'

'Sergeant Whiskeyjack is known to you?' Paran scowled. This Claw wasn't like the others. Whatever thinking they did about him they kept to themselves, and he preferred it that way.

The man climbed back into his saddle. 'Let's ride. We can talk on the way.'

Paran went to the other horse and tied his bag to the saddle, which was of the Seven Cities style, high-backed and with a hinged horn that folded forward – he'd seen several like this on this continent. It was a detail he'd already filed away. Natives from the Seven Cities had a predisposition for making trouble, and this whole Genabackan Campaign had been a foul-up from the very start. *No coincidence, that.* Most of the 2nd, 5th and 6th Armies had been recruited from the Seven Cities subcontinent.

He mounted and they settled into a steady canter across the plateau.

The Claw talked. 'Sergeant Whiskeyjack's got a lot of followers around here. Acts like he don't know it. You got to remember something that's been damn near forgotten back in Malaz – Whiskeyjack once commanded his own company ...'

Paran's head snapped around. That fact had been thoroughly stripped from the annals. As far as Empire history was concerned, it had never happened.

'... back in the days when Dassem Ultor ran the military,' the Claw continued blithely. 'It was Whiskeyjack's Seventh Company that ran down the Seven Cities' mage cabal out in the Pan'potsun Wastes. He ended the war then and there. Of course, everything went to hell after that, what with Hood taking Ultor's daughter. And not long after that, when Ultor died, all his men were pulled down fast. That's when the bureaucrats swallowed up the Army. Damn jackals. And they've been sniping at each other ever since and to hell with the campaigns.' The Claw sat forward, pushing the saddlehorn down, and spat past his horse's left ear.

Paran shivered, seeing that gesture. In the old days it had announced the beginning of tribal war among the Seven Cities. Now, it had become the

symbol of the Malaz 2nd Army. 'Are you suggesting,' he cut in, 'that the story you've just told me is commonplace?'

'Not in detail,' the Claw admitted. 'But some old veterans in the Second fought with Ultor, not just in Seven Cities but as far back as Falar.'

Paran thought for a time. The man riding beside him, though a Claw, was also 2nd Army. And he'd been through a lot with them. It made for an interesting perspective. He glanced at the man and saw him grinning. 'What's so funny?'

The man shrugged. 'The Bridgeburners are a little hot, these days. They're getting chaff for recruits and that makes it look like they're about to be disbanded. You talk with whoever it is you talk with back in Malaz, you tell them they'd end up with a mutiny on their hands, they start messing with the Bridgeburners. That's in every report I send but no one seems to listen to me.' His grin broadened. 'Maybe they think I've been turned or something, eh?'

Paran shrugged. 'You were called in to meet me, weren't you?'

The Claw laughed. 'You've really been out of touch, haven't you? They called me in because I'm the last Active in the Second. And as for the Fifth and Sixth – forget it. Brood's Tiste Andii could pick out a Claw from a thousand paces. None of them left, either. My own Claw Master was garotted two days back – that's something else, ain't it? You, I inherited, Captain. Once we hit the city, I send you on your way, and that's probably the last we'll ever see of each other. You deliver your mission details as Captain of the Ninth Squad, they either laugh in your face or they stick a knife in your eye – it's even betting what they'll do. Too bad, but there it is.'

Up ahead loomed the gates of Pale.

'One more thing,' the Claw said, his eyes on the merlons above the gate, 'just a bone I'll throw you in case Oponn's smiling on you. The High Mage Tayschrenn's running things here. Dujek's not happy, especially considering what happened with Moon's Spawn. It's a bad situation between them, but the High Mage is relying on his being in close and constant communication with the Empress, and that's what's keeping him on top. A warning, then.

Dujek's soldiers will follow him ... *anywhere.* And that goes for the Fifth and Sixth Armies, too. What's been gathered here is a storm waiting to break.'

Paran stared at the man. Topper had explained the situation, but Paran had dismissed the man's assessment – it had seemed too much like a scenario devised to justify the Empress filling the gallows. Not *a tangle I want to get involved in. Leave me to complete my single task – 1 desire no more than that.*

As they passed into the gate's shadow, the Claw spoke again. 'By the by, Tayschrenn just watched us arrive. Any chance he knows you, Captain?'

'No.' I hope not, he added silently.

As they trotted into the city proper and a wall of sound rose to meet them, Paran's eyes glazed slightly. Pale was a madhouse, buildings on all sides gutted by fire, the streets, despite being cobble-heaved in places and dented in others, were packed with people, carts, braying animals and marines. He wondered if he should start measuring his life in minutes. Taking command of a squad that had gone through four captains in three years, then delivering a mission that no sane soldier would consider, coupled with a brewing firestorm of a large-scale insurrection possibly headed by the Empire's finest military commander, against a High Mage who looked to be carving his own rather big niche in the world – all of this had Paran feeling somewhat dismayed.

He was jolted by a heavy slap on his back. The Claw had moved his horse close and now he leaned over.

'Out of your depth, Captain? Don't worry, every damn person here's out of their depth. Some know it, some don't. It's the ones who don't you got to worry about. Start with what's right in front of you and forget the rest for now. It'll show up in its own time. Find any marine and ask direction to the Bridgeburners. That's the easy part.'

Paran nodded.

The Claw hesitated, then leaned closer. 'I've been thinking, Captain. It's a hunch, mind you, but I think you're here to do some good. No, don't bother answering. Only, if you get into trouble, you get word to Toc the Younger, that's me. I'm in the Messenger Corps, outrider class, the Second. All right?'

Paran nodded again. 'Thank you,' he said, just as a loud crash sounded behind them, followed by a chorus of angry voices. Neither rider turned.

'What's that you said, Captain?'

Paran smiled. 'Better head off. Keep your cover – in case something happens to me. I'll find myself a guide, by the book.'

'Sure thing, Captain.' Toc the Younger waved, then swung his mount down a side-street. Moments later Paran lost sight of him. He drew a deep breath, then cast his gaze about, searching for a likely soldier.

Paran knew that his early years in the noble courts of his homeland had prepared him well for the kind of deception Adjunct Lorn demanded of him. In the past two years, however, he had begun to recognize more clearly what he was becoming. That brash, honest youth who had spoken with the Empress's Adjunct that day on the Itko Kanese coast now gnawed at him. He'd dropped right into Lorn's lap like a lump of unshaped clay. And she had proceeded to do what she did best.

What frightened Paran most, these days, was that he had grown used to being used. He'd been someone else so many times that he saw a thousand faces, heard a thousand voices, all at war with his own. When he thought of himself, of that young noble-born man with the overblown faith in honesty and integrity, the vision that came to him now was of something cold, hard and dark. It hid in the deepest shadows of his mind, and it watched. No contemplation, no judgement, just icy, clinical observation.

He didn't think that that young man would see the light of day again. He would just shrink further back, swallowed by darkness, then disappear, leaving no trace.

And Paran wondered if he even cared any more.

He marched into the barracks that had once housed Pale's Noble Guard. One old veteran lounged on a nearby cot, her rag-wrapped feet jutting over the end. The mattress had been stripped away and tossed into a corner; the woman lay on the flat boards, her hands behind her head.

Paran's gaze held on her briefly, then travelled down the ward. With the lone exception of the veteran marine, the place was empty. He returned his attention to her. 'Corporal, is it?'

The woman didn't move. 'Yeah, what?'

'I take it,' he said drily, 'that the chain of command has thoroughly disintegrated around here.'

Her eyes opened and managed a lazy sweep of the officer standing before her. 'Probably,' she said, then closed her eyes again. 'You looking for somebody or what?'

'I'm looking for the Ninth Squad, Corporal.'

'Why? They in trouble again?'

Paran smiled to himself. 'Are you the average Bridgeburner, Corporal?'

'All the average ones are dead,' she said.

'Who's your commander?' Paran asked.

'Antsy, but he's not here.'

'I can see that.' The captain waited, then sighed. 'Well, where is this Antsy?'

'Try Knobb's Inn, up the street. The last I seen of him he was losing his shirt to Hedge. Antsy's a card-player, right, only not a good one.' She began picking at a tooth at the back of her mouth.

Paran's brows rose. 'Your commander gambles with his men?'

'Antsy's a sergeant,' the woman explained. 'Our captain's dead. Anyway, Hedge is not in our squad.'

'Oh, and what squad is he with?'

The woman grinned, swallowing whatever her finger had dislodged. 'The Ninth.'

'What's your name, Corporal?'

'Picker, what's yours?'

'Captain Paran.'

Picker shot up into a sitting position, her eyes wide. 'Oh, you're the new captain who's yet to pull a sword, eh?'

Paran grinned. 'That's right.'

'You got any idea of the odds on you right now? It doesn't look good.'

'What do you mean?'

She smiled a broad smile. 'The way I pick it,' she said, leaning back down and closing her eyes again, 'the first blood you see on your hands is gonna be your own, Captain Paran. Go back to Quon Tali where it's safe. Go on, the Empress needs her feet licked.'

'They're clean enough,' Paran said. He was not sure how to deal with this situation. Part of him wanted to draw his sword and cut Picker in half. Another wanted to laugh, and that one had an edge of hysteria to it.

Behind him the outer door banged open and heavy footsteps sounded on the floorboards. Paran turned. A red-faced sergeant, his face dominated by an enormous handlebar moustache, stormed into the room. Ignoring Paran, he strode up beside Picker's cot and glowered down at her.

'Dammit, Picker, you told me Hedge was having a bad run, and now that bow-legged turd's cleaned me out!'

'Hedge *is* having a bad run,' Picker said. 'But yours is worse. You never asked me about that, did you? Antsy, meet Captain Paran, the Ninth's new officer.'

The sergeant swung around and stared. 'Hood's Breath,' he muttered, then faced Picker again.

'I'm looking for Whiskeyjack, Sergeant,' Paran said softly.

Something in the captain's tone brought Antsy around. He opened his mouth, then shut it when his eyes caught Paran's steady gaze. 'Some kid delivered a message. Whiskeyjack trooped out. A few of his people are at Knobb's.'

'Thank you, Sergeant.' Paran walked stiffly from the room.

Antsy let out a long breath and glanced at Picker.

'Two days,' she pronounced, 'then somebody does him. Old Rockface has already laid twenty to that.'

Antsy's expression tightened. 'Something tells me that'd be a damned shame.'

Paran entered Knobb's Inn and stopped just inside the doorway. The place was packed with soldiers, their voices a jumbled roar. Only a few showed on their uniforms the flame emblem of the Bridgeburners. The rest were 2nd Army.

At a large table beneath an overhanging walkway that fronted rooms on the first floor half a dozen Bridgeburners sat playing cards. A wide-shouldered man whose black hair was braided into a pony-tail and knotted with charms and fetishes sat with his back to the room, dealing out the cards with infinite patience. Even through the high-tide roar, Paran could hear the man's monotone counting. The others at the table deluged the dealer with curses, to little effect.

'Barghast,' Paran murmured, his gaze on the dealer. 'Only one in the Bridgeburners. That's the Ninth, then.' He took a deep breath, then plunged into the crowd.

By the time he arrived behind the Barghast his fine cloak was drenched with sour ale and bitter wine, and sweat cast a shine on his forehead. The Barghast, he saw, had just finished the deal and was setting down the deck

in the table's centre, revealing as he did so the endless blue woad tattooing on his bared arm, the spiral patterns marred here and there by white scars.

'Is this the Ninth?' Paran asked loudly.

The man opposite the Barghast glanced up, his weathered face the same colour as his leather cap, then returned his attention to his cards. 'You Captain Paran?'

'I am. And you, soldier?'

'Hedge.' He nodded at the heavy man seated to his right. 'That's Mallet, the squad's healer. And the Barghast's name is Trotts, and it ain't because he likes jogging.' He jerked his head to his left. 'The rest don't matter – they're Second Army and lousy players to boot. Take a seat, Captain. Whiskeyjack and the rest been called out for the time being. Should be back soon.'

Paran found an empty chair and pulled it up between Mallet and Trotts.

Hedge growled, 'Hey, Trotts, you gonna call this game or what?'

Releasing a long breath, Paran turned to Mallet. 'Tell me, Healer, what's the average life expectancy for an officer in the Bridgeburners?'

A grunt escaped Hedge's lips. 'Before or after Moon's Spawn?'

Mallet's heavy brows rose slightly as he answered the captain. 'Maybe two campaigns. Depends on a lot of things. Balls ain't enough, but it helps. And that means forgetting everything you learned and jumping into your sergeant's lap like a babe. You listen to him, you might make it.'

Hedge thumped the table. 'Wake up, Trotts! What are we playing here?'

The Barghast scowled. 'I'm thinking,' he rumbled.

Paran leaned back and unhitched his belt.

Trotts decided on a game, to the groans of Hedge, Mallet and the three 2nd Army soldiers, since it was the game Trotts always decided on.

Mallet spoke. 'Captain, you've been hearing things about the Bridgebumers, right?'

Paran nodded. 'Most officers are terrified of the Bridge-burners. Word is, the mortality rate's so high because half the captains end up with a dagger in their back.'

He paused, and was about to continue when he noticed the sudden silence. The game had stopped, and all eyes had fixed on him. Sweat broke out under Paran's clothing. 'And from what I've seen so far,' he pressed on, 'I'm likely to believe that rumour. But I'll tell you something – all of you – if I die with a knife in my back, it'd better be because I earned it. Otherwise, I will be severely disappointed.' He hitched his belt and rose. 'Tell the sergeant I'll be in the barracks. I'd like to speak with him before we're officially mustered.'

Hedge gave a slow nod. 'Will do, Captain.' The man hesitated. 'Uh, Captain? Care to sit in on the game?'

Paran shook his head. 'Thanks, no.' A grin tugged the corner of his mouth. 'Bad practice, an officer taking his enlisted men's money.'

'Now there's a challenge you'd better back up some time,' Hedge said, his eyes brightening.

'I'll think about it,' Paran replied, as he left the table. Pushing through the crowd, he felt a growing sense of something that caught him completely off-guard: insignificance. A lot of arrogance had been drilled into him, from his days as a boy among the nobility through to his time at the academy. That arrogance now cowered in some corner of his brain, shocked silent and numb.

He had known that well before he'd met the Adjunct: his path into and through the officer training corps of the Marine Academy had been an easy procession marked by winks and nods. But the Empire's wars were fought here, thousands of leagues away, and here, Paran realized, nobody cared one whit about court influences and mutually favourable deals. Those short-cuts swelled his chances of dying, and dying fast. If not for the Adjunct, he'd have been totally unprepared to take command.

Paran grimaced as he pushed open the tavern door and stepped out into the street. It was no wonder the old Emperor's armies had so easily

devoured the feudal kingdoms in his path on the road to Empire. He was suddenly glad of the stains marring his uniform – he no longer looked out of place.

He strode into the alley leading to the barracks' side entrance. The way lay in shadow beneath high-walled buildings and the faded canopies that hung over sagging balconies. Pale was a dying city. He knew enough of its history to recognize the bleached tints of long-lost glory. True, it had commanded enough power to forge an alliance with Moon's Spawn, but the captain suspected that that had had more to do with the Moon's lord's sense of expedience than to any kind of mutual recognition of power. The local gentry made much of finery and pomp, but their props looked tired and worn. He wondered how alike he and his kind were with these droopy citizens—

A sound behind him, the faintest scuff, made him turn. A shadow-wrapped figure closed on him. Paran cried out, snatching at his sword. An icy wind washed over him as the figure moved in. The captain backpedalled, seeing the glint of blades in each hand. He twisted to one side, his sword half-way out of the scabbard. His attacker's left hand darted up. Paran jerked his head back, throwing his shoulder forward to block a blade that never arrived. Instead, the long dagger slid like fire into his chest. A second blade sank into his side even as blood gushed up inside to fill his mouth. Coughing and groaning, Paran reeled, careened off a wall, then slid down with one hand grasping futilely at the damp stones, his fingernails gouging tracks through the mould.

A blackness closed around his thoughts which seemed to involve only a deep, heartfelt regret. Faintly, a ringing sound came to his ears, as if something small and metallic was skittering across a hard surface. The sound remained, of something spinning, and the darkness encroached no further.

'Sloppy,' a man said in a thin voice. 'I am surprised.' The accent was familiar, pulling him to a childhood memory, his father dealing with Dal Honese traders.

The answer came from directly above Paran. 'Keeping an eye on me?' Another accent he recognized, Kanese, and the voice seemed to come from a girl, or a child, yet he knew it was the voice of his killer.

'Coincidence,' the other replied, then giggled. 'Someone – *something*, I should say – has entered our Warren. Uninvited. My Hounds hunt.'

'I don't believe in coincidences.'

Again came the giggle. 'Nor do I. Two years ago we began a game of our own. A simple settling of old scores. It seems we have stumbled into a wholly different game here in Pale.'

'Whose?'

'I shall have that answer soon enough.'

'Don't get distracted, Ammanas. Laseen remains our target, and the collapse of the Empire she rules but never earned.'

'I have, as always, supreme confidence in you, Cotillion.'

'I must be getting back,' the girl said, moving away.

'Of course. So this is the man Lorn sent to find you?'

'I believe so. This should draw her into the fray, in any case.'

'And this is desirable?'

The conversation faded as the two speakers walked away leaving, as the only sound in Paran's head, that whirring hum, as if a coin was spinning, endlessly spinning.

CHAPTER FOUR

They were of a kind, then
the histories writ large
in tattooed tracery
the tales a tracking
of old wounds
but something glowed hard
in their eyes – those
flame-gnawed arches,
that vanishing span,
they are their own past
each in turn destined
to fall in line
on the quiet wayside
beside the river
they refuse to name ...

The Bridgebumers (IV. i)
Toc the Younger (b.1141)

Tattersail glared at Whiskeyjack. 'Hairlock is insane,' she pronounced. 'That edge to him was always there, but he's chewed holes in his own Warrens and he's tasting Chaos. Worse yet, it's making him more powerful, more dangerous.'

They had gathered in Tattersail's quarters, which consisted of an outer room — where they now sat – and a bedroom with the rare luxury of a solid wood door. The past occupants had hastily stripped the place of anything valuable and portable, leaving behind only the larger pieces of furniture. Tattersail sat at the table, along with Whiskeyjack, Quick Ben and Kalam, and the sapper named Fiddler. The air in the room had grown hot, stifling.

'Of course he's insane,' Quick Ben replied, looking at his sergeant, whose face remained impassive. The wizard hastily added, 'But that's to be expected. Fener's tail, lady, he's got the body of a puppet! Of course that's twisted him.'

'How twisted?' Whiskeyjack asked his wizard. 'He's supposed to be watching our backs, isn't he?'

Kalam said, 'Quick's got him under control. Hairlock's backtracking, working through the maze – he'll find out who in the Empire wants us dead.'

'The danger,' Quick Ben added, rounding on Tattersail, 'is his being detected. He needs to slip through the Warrens the unconventional way – the regular paths are all trip-wired.'

Tattersail mulled over that point, then nodded. 'Tayschrenn would find him, or at least catch wind that someone's sniffing around. But Hairlock's using the power of Chaos, the paths that lie *between* Warrens, and that's unhealthy – not just for him, but for all of us.'

'Why all of us?' Whiskeyjack asked.

Quick Ben answered, 'It weakens the Warrens, frays the fabric, which in turns allows Hairlock to break into them at will... and out again. But we have no choice. We have to give Hairlock his rope. For now.'

The sorceress sighed, massaging her brow. 'Tayschrenn's the one you're looking for. I've already told you—'

'That's not good enough,' Quick Ben cut in. 'How many agents is he using? What are the details of the plan – what the hell *is* the plan? Is all this on Laseen's orders, or is the High Mage eyeing the throne for himself? We need to know, dammit!'

'All right, all right,' Tattersail said. 'So Hairlock unravels the whole thing for you – then what? Do you intend to try to kill Tayschrenn and everyone else involved? Are you counting on my help in that?' She looked from one face to the next. Each revealed nothing. Anger flared and she rose. 'I know,' she said stiffly, 'that Tayschrenn probably murdered A'Karonys, Nightchill,

and my cadre. He probably knew your tunnels would collapse around you, and he might well have decided that Dujek's Second was a threat that needed culling. But if you think I'm going to help you without knowing what you're planning, you're mistaken. There's more to all this than you're willing to tell me. If it was just your survival at stake, why don't you just desert? I doubt Dujek would chase you down. Unless, of course, Tayschrenn's suspicions about Onearm and the Second are grounded in truth – you've plans for a mutiny, proclaiming Dujek Emperor and marching off to Genabaris.' She paused, looking from one man to the next. 'Has Tayschrenn simply anticipated you, thereby fouling up your plans? Am I being pulled into a conspiracy? If I am, then I have to know its eventual goals. I have that right, don't I?'

Whiskeyjack grunted, then reached for the jug of wine standing on the table. He refilled everyone's cup.

Quick Ben let out a long breath, then rubbed the back of his neck. 'Tattersail,' he said quietly, 'we're not going to challenge Tayschrenn directly. That would be suicide. No, we'll cut away his support, carefully, with precision, then we arrange his ... *fall from grace.* Assuming the Empress is not involved. But we need to know more, we need those answers before we can decide our options. You don't have to get any more involved than you already are. In fact, it's safer that way. Hairlock wants you to protect *his* back, failing every other option. Chances are, that won't be necessary.' He looked up and gave her a strained smile. 'Leave Tayschrenn to me and Kalam.'

All *very well, but you didn't answer me.* Tattersail looked at the other black-skinned man, her eyes narrowing. 'You were a Claw once, weren't you?'

Kalam shrugged.

'I thought no one could leave – alive.'

He shrugged again.

The sapper, Fiddler, growled something incomprehensible and rose from his chair. He began pacing, his bandied legs carrying him from one wall to

the next, like a fox in a pit. No one paid him any further attention.

Whiskeyjack handed a cup to Tattersail. 'Stay with us in this, Sorceress. Quick Ben doesn't usually foul things ... too badly.' He made a sour face. 'I admit, I'm not completely convinced either, but I've learned to trust him. You can take that for whatever it's worth.'

Tattersail took a deep draught of wine. She wiped her lips. 'Your squad's heading to Darujhistan tonight. Covert, which means I won't be able to communicate with you if the situation turns bad.'

'Tayschrenn would detect the usual ways,' Quick Ben said. 'Hairlock's our only unbreachable link – you reach us through him, Tattersail.'

Whiskeyjack eyed the sorceress. 'Back to Hairlock. You don't trust him.'

'No.'

The sergeant fell silent, his gaze fixed on the tabletop. His impassive expression fell away, revealing a war of emotions.

He *keeps his world bottled up, but the pressure's building.* She wondered what would happen when everything broke loose inside him.

The two Seven Cities men waited, eyes on their sergeant. Only Fiddler continued his preoccupied pacing. The sapper's mismatched uniform still carried the stains of the tunnels. Someone else's blood had splashed thickly on the front of his tunic – as if a friend had died in his arms. Poorly healed blisters showed under the uneven bristle of his cheeks and jaw, and his lank red hair hung haphazardly beneath his leather helmet.

A long minute passed, then the sergeant nodded sharply to himself. His hard eyes still fixed on the tabletop, he said, 'All right, Sorceress. We'll give you this. Quick Ben, tell her about Sorry.'

Tattersail's brows rose. She crossed her arms and faced the wizard.

Quick Ben looked none too pleased. He shifted uneasily and cast a hopeful glance at Kalam, but the big man looked away.

Whiskeyjack growled, 'Now, Wizard.'

Quick Ben met Tattersail's steady gaze with an almost childlike expression – fear, guilt and chagrin flitted across his fine features. 'You remember her?'

She barked a harsh laugh. 'Not an easy one to forget. An odd ... sense ... about her. Dangerous.' She thought about revealing what she'd learned during her Fatid with Tayschrenn. Virgin *of Death.* But something held her back. No, she corrected herself, not just something – I *still don't trust them.* 'You suspect she's in the service of someone else?'

The wizard's face was ashen. He cleared his throat. 'She was recruited two years ago in Itko Kan, one of the usual sweeps across the Empire's heartland.'

Kalam's voice rumbled beside her. 'Something ugly happened there at around the same time. It's been buried pretty deep, but the Adjunct became involved, and a Claw came in her wake and silenced damn near everyone in the city guard who might have talked. I made use of old sources, scrounged up some odd details.'

'Odd,' Quick Ben said, 'and revealing, if you know what you're looking for.'

Tattersail smiled to herself. These two men had a way of talking in tandem. She returned her attention to the wizard, who continued.

'Seems a company of cavalry hit some hard luck. No survivors. As for what they ran into, it had something to do with—'

'Dogs,' Kalam finished without missing a beat.

The sorceress frowned at the assassin.

'Put it together,' Quick Ben said, drawing her attention once again. 'Adjunct Lorn is Laseen's personal mage-killer. Her arrival on the scene suggests sorcery was involved in the massacre. High sorcery.' The wizard's gaze narrowed on Tattersail and he waited.

She swallowed another mouthful of wine. *The Fatid showed me. Dogs and sorcery.* Into her mind returned the image of the Rope as she had seen it

in the reading. *High House Shadow, ruled by Shadowthrone and the Rope, and in their service* – 'The Seven Hounds of Shadow.' She looked to Whiskeyjack but the sergeant's eyes remained downcast, his expression blank as stone.

'Good,' Quick Ben snapped, somewhat impatiently. 'The Hounds hunted. That's our guess, but it's a good one. The Nineteenth Regiment of the Eighth Cavalry were all killed, even their horses. A league's worth of coastline settlements needed repopulating.'

'Fine.' Tattersail sighed. 'But what does this have to do with Sorry?'

The wizard turned away and Kalam spoke. 'Hairlock's going to follow more than just one trail, Sorceress. We're pretty sure Sorry is somehow involved with House Shadow ...'

'It certainly seems,' Tattersail said, 'that since its arrival in the Deck and the opening of its Warren, Shadow's path crosses the Empire's far too often to be accidental. Why should the Warren between Light and Dark display such ... obsession with the Malazan Empire?'

Kalam's gaze was veiled. 'Odd, isn't it? After all, the Warren only appeared following the Emperor's assassination at Laseen's hand. Shadowthrone and his companion the Patron of Assassins – Cotillion – were unheard of before Kellanved and Dancer's deaths. It also seems that whatever ... disagreement there is between House Shadow and Empress Laseen is, uhm, personal...'

Tattersail closed her eyes. *Dammit, it's that obvious, isn't it?* 'Quick Ben,' she said, 'hasn't there always been an accessible Warren of Shadow? Rashan, the Warren of Illusions?'

'Rashan is a false Warren, Sorceress. A shadow of what it claims to represent, if you'll excuse my wording. It is itself an illusion. The gods alone know where it came from, or who created it in the first place, or even why. But the true Warren of Shadow has been closed, inaccessible for millennia, until the 1154th year of Burn's Sleep, nine years ago. The earliest writings of House Shadow seemed to indicate that its throne was occupied by a Tiste Edur—'

'Tiste Edur?' Tattersail interrupted. 'Who were they?'

The wizard shrugged. 'Cousins of the Tiste Andii? I don't know, Sorceress.'

You don't know? Actually, it seems you know a hell of a lot.

Quick Ben shrugged to punctuate his last words, then he added, 'In any case, we believe Sorry is connected with House Shadow.'

Whiskeyjack startled everyone by surging to his feet. 'I'm not convinced,' he said, throwing Quick Ben a glare that told Tattersail there had been countless arguments over this issue. 'Sorry likes killing, and having her around is like having spiders down your shirt. I know all that, I can see it and feel it the same as any of you. It doesn't mean she's some kind of demon.' He turned to face Kalam. 'She kills like you do, Kalam. You've both got ice in your veins. So what? I look at you and I see a man because that's what men are capable of – I don't hunt for excuses because I don't like to think that that's how nasty we can get. We look at Sorry and we see reflections of ourselves. Hood take it, if we don't like what we see.'

He sat down just as abruptly as he had risen, and reached for the wine jug. When he continued his voice had dropped a notch. 'That is my opinion, anyway. I'm no expert on demons but I've seen enough mortal men and women *act* like demons, given the need. My squad's wizard is scared witless by a fifteen-year-old girl. My assassin slips a knife into his palm whenever she's within twenty paces of him.' He met Tattersail's eyes. 'So, Hairlock has two missions instead of one, and if you think Quick Ben and Kalam are correct in their suspicions you can walk from all this – I know how things go when gods step into the fray.' The lines around his eyes tightened momentarily, a replaying of memories. 'I know,' he whispered.

Tattersail slowly let out her breath, which she had been holding since the sergeant first rose to his feet. His needs were clear to her now: he wanted Sorry to be just human, just a girl twisted hard by a hard world. Because that was something he understood, something he could deal with. 'Back in Seven Cities,' she said quietly, 'the story goes that the Emperor's First Sword – his commander of his armies – Dassem Ultor, had accepted a god's

offer. Hood made Dassem his Knight of Death. Then something happened, something went ... wrong. And Dassem renounced the title, swore a vow of vengeance against Hood – against the Lord of Death himself. All at once other Ascendants started meddling, manipulating events. It all culminated with Dassem's murder, then the Emperor's assassination, and blood in the streets, temples at war, sorceries unleashed.' She paused, seeing the memories of those times reflected in Whiskeyjack's face. 'You were there.' *And you don't want it to happen again, here and now. You think if you can deny that Sorry serves Shadow your conviction will be enough to shape reality. You need to believe that to save your sanity, because there are some things in life that you can go through only once. Oh, Whiskeyjack, I can't ease your burden. You see, 1 think Quick Ben and Kalam are right.* 'If Shadow has claimed the girl, the trail will be evident – Hairlock will find it.'

'Do you walk away from this?' the sergeant asked.

Tattersail smiled. 'The only death I fear is dying ignorant. No, is my answer.' *Brave words, woman. These people have a way of bringing out the best – or maybe the worst – in me.*

Something glittered in Whiskeyjack's eyes, and he nodded. 'So that's that,' he said gruffly. He leaned back. 'What's on your mind, Fiddler?' he asked the sapper, who was still pacing behind him.

'Got a bad feeling,' the man muttered. 'Something's wrong. Not here, though, but close by. It's just—' He stopped, cocking his head, then he sighed, resuming his uneasy walk. 'Not sure, not sure.'

Tattersail's eyes followed the wiry little man. A natural talent? Something working on pure instinct? Very rare. 'I think you should listen to him,' she said.

Whiskeyjack gave her a pained look.

Kalam grinned, a network of lines crinkling around his dark eyes. 'Fiddler saved our lives in the tunnel,' he explained. 'One of his bad feelings.'

Tattersail leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. She asked, 'So where is Sorry right now?'

Fiddler whirled, his eyes widening on the sorceress. His mouth opened, then snapped shut again.

The other three surged to their feet, chairs toppling backwards.

'We've got to get going,' Fiddler grated. 'There's a knife out there, and it's got blood on it.'

Whiskeyjack checked his longsword. 'Kalam, out front twenty paces.' He faced Tattersail as the assassin slipped out. 'We lost her a couple of hours ago. Happens a lot between missions.' His face looked drawn. 'There may be no connection with this bloodied knife.'

A blossoming of power filled the room and Tattersail spun to face Quick Ben. The wizard had accessed his Warren. The sorcery bled a strange, swirling flavour that she could not recognize, and it frightened her with its intensity. She met the black man's shining eyes. 'I should know you,' she whispered. 'There's not enough true masters in this world for me to not know you. Who are you, Quick Ben?'

Whiskeyjack interjected, 'Everyone ready?'

The wizard's only answer to Tattersail was a shrug. To Whiskeyjack he said, 'Ready.'

The sergeant strode to the door. 'Take care, Sorceress.'

A moment later they were gone. Tattersail righted the chairs, then refilled her goblet with wine. *High House Shadow, and a knife in the dark. A new game's begun, or the old one's just turned.*

Paran opened his eyes to bright, hot sunlight, but the sky above him was ... wrong. He saw no sun; the yellow glare was sharp yet sourceless. Heat gusted down on him with oppressive weight.

A moaning sound filled the air, not wind because there was no wind. He tried to think, tried to recall his last memories, but the past was blank, torn away, and only fragments remained: a ship's cabin, the thunk of his dagger

as he flung it again and again against a wooden post; a man with rings, hair of white, grinning sardonically.

He rolled to one side, seeking the source of the moaning sound. A dozen paces away on the flat plain that was neither grass nor earth rose an arched gateway leading to—

Nothing. I've seen such gates before. None so large, 1 think, as this one. None looking quite like this ... this thing. Twisted, upright yet from his position sideways, the gate was not, he realized, made of stone. Bodies, *naked human figures. Carved likenesses? No ... oh, no.* The figures moved, groaned, slowly writhed in place. Flesh blackened, as if stained with peat, eyes closed and mouths open with faint, endless moans.

Paran climbed to his feet, staggered as a wave of dizziness ran through him, then fell once again to the ground.

'Something like indecision,' a voice said coolly.

Blinking, Paran rolled on to his back. Above him stood a young man and woman – twins. The man wore loose silk clothing, white and gold; his thin face was pale, expressionless. His twin was wrapped in a shimmering purple cape, her blonde hair casting reddish glints.

It was the man who'd spoken. He smiled without humour down at Paran. 'We've long admired your ...' His eyes widened.

'Sword,' the woman finished, a smirk in her tone.

'Far more subtle than, say, a coin, don't you think?' The man's smile turned mocking. 'Most,' he said, swinging his head to study the ghastly edifice of the gate, 'don't pause here. It's said there was a cult, once, in the habit of drowning victims in bogs ... I imagine Hood finds them aesthetically pleasing.'

'Hardly surprising,' the woman drawled, 'that Death has no taste.'

Paran tried to sit up, but his limbs refused the command. He dropped his head back, feeling the strange loam yield to its weight. 'What has happened?' he rasped.

'You were murdered,' the man said lightly.

Paran closed his eyes. 'Why, then, have I not passed through Hood's Gate, if that is what it is?'

'We're meddling,' the woman said.

Oponn, the Twins of Chance. And my sword, *my untested blade purchased years ago, with a name I chose so capriciously*— 'What does Oponn want from me?'

'Only this stumbling, ignorant thing you call your life, dear boy. The trouble with Ascendants is that they try to rig every game. Of course, *we* delight in ... uncertainty.'

A distant howl stroked the air.

'Oops,' the man said. 'Come to make certain of things, I'd say. We'd best leave, sister. Sorry, Captain, but it seems you'll pass through that Gate after all.'

'Maybe,' the woman said.

Her brother rounded on her. 'We agreed! No confrontation! Confrontation's messy. Unpleasant. I despise discomfiting scenes! Besides, the ones who come don't play fair.'

'Then neither do we,' the sister snapped. She turned to the gate, raised her voice, 'Lord of Death! We would speak with you! Hood!'

Paran rolled his head, watched as a bent, limping figure emerged from the Gate. Wearing rags, the figure slowly approached. Paran squinted – an old woman, a child with drool on its chin, a deformed young girl, a stunted, broken Trell, a desiccated Tiste Andii—

'Oh, make up your mind!' the sister said.

The apparition cocked a death's head, the grin of its teeth stained muddy yellow. 'You have chosen,' it said in quavering voice, 'unimaginatively.'

'You are not Hood.' The brother scowled.

Bones shifted under creaking skin. 'The lord is busy.'

'Busy? We do not take kindly to insults,' the sister said.

The apparition cackled, then stopped abruptly. 'How unfortunate. A mellifluous, deep-throated laugh would be more to my liking. Ah well, in answer: nor does my lord appreciate your interruption of this natural passage of a soul.'

'Murdered at the hand of a god,' the sister said. 'That makes him fair game.'

The creature grunted, shuffled close to look down at Paran. The eye sockets glimmered faintly, as if old pearls hid within the shadows. 'What, Oponn,' it asked, as it studied Paran, 'do you wish of my lord?'

'Nothing from me,' the brother said, turning away.

'Sister?'

'Even for the gods,' she replied, 'death awaits, an uncertainty hiding deep within them.' She paused. 'Make them uncertain.'

The creature cackled again, and again cut it short. 'Reciprocity.'

'Of course,' the sister responded. 'I'll look for another, a death premature. Meaningless, even.'

The apparition was silent, then the head creaked in a nod. 'In this mortal's shadow, of course.'

'Agreed.'

'My shadow?' Paran asked. 'What does that mean, precisely?'

'Much sorrow, alas,' the apparition said. 'Someone close to you shall walk through Death's Gates ... in your place.'

'No. Take me instead, I beg of you.'

'Be quiet!' snapped the apparition. 'Pathos makes me ill.'

The howl reverberated again, much closer this time.

'We'd best leave,' the brother said.

The apparition opened its jaws as if to laugh, then clacked them shut. 'No,' it muttered, 'not again.' It hobbled back to the Gate, pausing once to turn back and wave.

The sister rolled her eyes.

'Time to leave,' the brother repeated uneasily.

'Yes, yes,' his sister said, eyeing Paran.

The captain sighed, looking away. 'No final riddles, if you please.' When he looked back Oponn was gone. Once again he tried to sit up. Once again he failed.

A new presence arrived, filling the air with tension, a smell of threat.

Sighing, Paran craned his head around. He saw a pair of Hounds – massive hulking creatures, dark, tongues lolling as they sat, watching him. *These are what killed the company in Itko Kan. These are the cursed, horrifying beasts.* Both Hounds froze, heads hunching towards him, as if seeing the hatred in his eyes. Paran felt his heart go cold at their avid attention. He was slow to realize he had bared his teeth.

A stain of shadow separated the two Hounds, the stain vaguely man-shaped and translucent. The shadow spoke. 'The one Lorn sent. I would have thought someone of ... ability. Though, it must be said, you died well.'

'Evidently not,' Paran said.

'Ah, yes,' the shadow said, 'and so it falls to me to complete the task. Busy hours, these.'

Paran thought of Oponn's conversation with Hood's servant. *Uncertainty. If a god fears anything* ... 'The day you die, Shadowthrone,' he said quietly, 'I will be waiting for you on the other side of that gate. With a smile. Gods *can* die, can't they?'

Something crackled in the portalway of the gate. Shadowthrone and the Hounds flinched.

Paran continued, wondering at his own courage, to bait these Ascendants. *Always despised authority, didn't I?* 'Half-way between life and death – this promise costs me nothing, you see.'

'Liar, the only Warren that can touch you now is—'

'Death,' Paran said. 'Of course,' he added, 'someone else ... interceded, and was certain to leave long before you and your too-loud Hounds arrived.'

The King of High House Shadow edged forward. 'Who? What does it plan? Who opposes us?'

'Find your own answers, Shadowthrone. You do understand, don't you, that if you send me on my way now, your ... opposition will seek other means? Knowing nothing of who their next tool is, how will you sniff out their next move? You'll be left darting at shadows.'

'Easier to follow you,' the god conceded. 'I must speak with my companion—'

'As you like,' Paran interrupted. 'I wish I could stand ...'

The god rasped laughter. 'If you stand, you walk. One way only. You have a reprieve – and if Hood comes to gather you to your feet, the guiding hand is his, not ours. Excellent. And if you live, so shall my shadow follow you.'

Paran grunted. 'My shadow's a crowded place, these days.' His eyes fell once again on the Hounds. The creatures watched him still, their eyes faint coals. *I'll have you yet.* As if fanned by his silent promise, the red glows sharpened.

The god resumed speaking, but the world had darkened around Paran, fading, dwindling, until the voice was gone, and with it all awareness but the faint, renewed spinning of a coin.

An unknown span of time passed in which Paran wandered through memories he had thought long lost – his days as a child clinging to his mother's dress and taking his first, tottering steps; the nights of storm when he raced down the chill hallway to his parents' bedroom, tiny feet slapping

on the cold stone; holding the hands of his two sisters as they stood waiting on the hard cobbles of the courtyard – waiting, waiting for someone. The images seemed to lurch sideways in his head. His mother's dress? No, an old woman in the service of the household. Not his parents' bedroom, but those of the servants; and there, in the courtyard with his sisters, they'd stood half the morning, awaiting the arrival of their mother and father, two people they barely knew.

In his mind scenes replayed themselves, moments of mysterious import, hidden significance, pieces of a puzzle he couldn't recognize, shaped by hands not his own and with a purpose he couldn't fathom. A tremor of fear travelled the length of his thoughts as he sensed that something – someone – was busy reordering the formative events of his life, turning them on end and casting them into the present new shadows. Somehow, the guiding hand ... *played.* With him, with his life.

It seemed an odd kind of death—

Voices reached him.

'Aw, hell.' A face bent close to Paran's own, looked into his open blank eyes. The face was Picker's. 'He didn't stand a chance,' she said.

Sergeant Antsy spoke from a few feet away. 'Nobody in the Ninth would've done him like this,' he said. 'Not right here in the city.'

Picker reached out and touched the chest wound, her fingers surprisingly soft on his torn flesh. 'This isn't Kalam's work.'

'You all right here?' Antsy asked. 'I'm going to get Hedge and Mallet, and whoever else has shown up.'

'Go ahead,' Picker replied, seeking and finding the second wound, eight inches below the first. 'This one came later, right-handed and weak.'

A very odd death indeed, Paran thought. What held him here? Had there been another ... place? A place of heat, searing yellow light? And voices, figures faint, indistinct, there beneath the arch of ... of crowds strangely held in place, eyes closed, mouths open. A chorus of the dead ... Had he gone somewhere only to return to these real voices, these real hands on his

flesh? How could he see through the empty glass of his eyes, or feel the woman's gentle touch on his body? And what of the pain, rising as from a great depth like a leviathan?

Picker withdrew her hands and rested her elbows on her thighs as she crouched before Paran. 'Now, how come you're still bleeding, Captain? Those knife wounds are at least an hour old.'

The pain reached the surface. Paran felt his gummy lips split. The hinges of his jaw cracked and he drew in a savage gasp. Then screamed.

Picker bolted backwards, her sword appearing in her hand as if from nowhere as she backed to the alley's far wall. 'Shedenul's mercy!'

Boots pounded on the cobbles off to her right and her head whipped around. 'Healer! The bastard's alive!'

The third bell after midnight tolled sonorously through the city of Pale, echoing down streets emptied by the curfew. A light rain had begun, casting the night sky with a murky gold hue. In front of the large, rambling estate, two blocks from the old palace, that had become part of the 2nd's quarters, two marines wrapped in black raincapes stood guard outside the main gate.

'Damned miserable night, ain't it?' one said, shivering.

The other shifted his pike to his left shoulder and hawked a mouthful of phlegm into the gutter. 'You just guessing, mind,' he said, wagging his head. 'Any other brilliant insights you feel ready to toss my way, you just speak up, hear?'

'What did I do?' the first man demanded, hurt.

The second soldier stiffened. 'Hush, someone coming up the street.'

The guards waited tensely, hands on their weapons. A figure crossed from the opposite side and stepped into the torchlight.

'Halt,' the second guard growled. 'Advance slowly, and you'd better have business here.'

The man took a step closer. 'Kalam, Bridgeburners, the Ninth,' he said quietly.

The marines remained wary, but the Bridgeburner kept his distance, his dark face glistening in the rain. 'What's your business here?' the second guard asked.

Kalam grunted and glanced back down the street. 'We didn't expect to be coming back. As for our business, well, it's better that Tayschrenn don't know about it. You with me, soldier?'

The marine grinned and spat a second time into the gutter. 'Kalam – you'd be Whiskeyjack's corporal.' There was a new tone of respect in his voice. 'Whatever you want you've got.'

'Damned right,' the other soldier growled. 'I was at Nathilog, sir. You want us blinded by the rain for the next hour or so, you just say the word.'

'We're bringing in a body,' Kalam said. 'But this never happened on your shift.'

'Hood's Gate, no,' the second marine said. 'Peaceful as the Seventh Dawn.'

From down the street came the sounds of a number of men approaching. Kalam waved them forward, then slipped inside as the first guard unlocked the gate. 'What do you figure they're up to?' he asked, after Kalam had disappeared.

The other shrugged. 'Hope it'll stick something hard and sharp up Tayschrenn, Hood take the treacherous murderer. And, knowing them Bridgeburners, that's exactly what they'll do.' He fell silent as the group arrived. Two men carried a third man between them. The second soldier's eyes widened as he saw the rank of the unconscious man, and the blood staining the front of his baldric. 'Oponn's luck,' he hissed to the Bridgeburner nearest him, a man wearing a tarnished leather cap. 'The pull not the push,' he added.

The Bridgeburner threw him a sharp look. 'You see a woman come after us you get out of her way, you hear me?'

.'A woman? Who?'

'She's in the Ninth, and she might be thirsty for blood,' the man replied, as he and his comrade dragged the captain through the gate. 'Forget security,' he said, over his shoulder. 'Just stay alive if you can.'

The two marines stared at each other after the men had passed. After a moment the first soldier reached to close the gate. The other man stopped him.

'Leave it open,' he muttered. 'Let's find some shadows, close but not too close.'

'Hell of a night,' the first marine said.

'You got a thing about stating the obvious, haven't you?' the other said, as he moved away from the gate.

The first man shrugged helplessly, then hurried to follow.

Tattersail stared long and hard at the card centred on the field she had laid down. She had chosen a spiral pattern, working her way through the entire Deck of Dragons and arriving with a final card, which could mark either an apex or an epiphany depending on how it placed itself.

The spiral had become a pit, a tunnel downward, and at its root, seeming distant and shadow-hazed, waited the image of a Hound. She sensed an immediacy to this reading. High House Shadow had become involved, a challenge to Oponn's command of the game. Her eyes were drawn to the first card she had placed, at the spiral's very beginning. The Mason of High House Death held a minor position among the overall rankings, but now the figure etched on the wood seemed to have risen to an eminent placing. Brother to the Soldier of the same House, the Mason's image was that of a lean, greying man clothed in faded leathers. His massive, vein-roped hands held stone-cutting tools and around him rose roughly dressed menhirs. Tattersail found she could make out faint glyphs on the stones, a language unfamiliar to her but reminiscent of Seven Cities' script. In the House of Death the Mason was the builder of barrows, the placer of stones, a promise

of death not to one or a few but to many. The language on the menhirs delivered a message not intended for her: the Mason had carved those words for himself, and time had worn the edges – even the man himself appeared starkly weathered, his face latticed with cracks, his silvered beard thin and tangled. The role had been assumed by a man who'd once worked in stone, but no longer.

The sorceress was having difficulty understanding this field. The patterns she saw startled her: it was as if a whole new game had begun, with players stepping on to the scene at every turn. Midway through the spiral was High House Dark's Knight, its placement counterpoint to both the beginning and the end. As with the last time the Deck had unveiled this draconian figure, something hovered in the inky sky behind the Knight, as elusive as ever, at times seeming like a dark stain on her own eyes.

The Knight's sword reached a black, smoky streak towards the Hound at the spiral's apex, and in this instance she knew its meaning. The future held a clash between the Knight and High House Shadow. The thought both frightened Tattersail and left her feeling relieved – it would be a confrontation. There would be no alliance between the Houses. It was a rare thing to see such a clear and direct link between two Houses: the potential for devastation left her cold with worry. Blood spilled on such a high level of power cast aftershocks down through the world. Inevitably, people would be hurt. And this thought brought her round back to the Mason of High House Death. Tattersail's heart thudded heavy in her chest. She blinked sweat from her eyes and managed a few deep breaths.

'Blood,' she murmured, 'ever flows downward.' *The Mason's shaping a barrow – after all, he is Death's servant — and he will touch me directly. That barrow ... is it mine? Do 1 back out? Abandon the Bridgeburners to their fate, flee from Tayschrenn, from the Empire?*

An ancient memory flooded her thoughts, which she had repressed for almost two centuries. The image shook her. Once again she walked the muddy streets of the village where she had been born, a child bearing the Talent, a child who had seen the horsemen of war sweeping down into their

sheltered lives. A child who had run away from the knowledge, telling no one, and the night came, a night of screams and death.

Guilt rose within her, its spectre visage hauntingly familiar. After all these years its face still held the power to shatter her world, making hollow those things she needed solid, rattling her illusion of security with a shame almost two hundred years old.

The image sank once again into its viscid pool, but it left her changed. There would be no running away this time. Her eyes returned one last time to the Hound. The beast's eyes seemed to burn with yellow fire, boring into her as if seeking to brand her soul.

She stiffened in her chair as a cold presence washed over her from behind. Slowly, Tattersail turned.

'Sorry for not giving you warning,' Quick Ben said, emerging from the swirling cloud of his Warren. It held a strange, spicy scent. 'Company's coming,' he said, seeming distracted. 'I've called Hairlock. He comes by Warren.'

Tattersail shivered as a wave of premonition brushed her spine. She faced the Deck again and began to collect the cards.

'The situation's just become a lot more complicated,' the wizard said behind her.

The sorceress paused, giving herself a small, tight smile. 'Really?' she murmured.

The wind flung rain against Whiskeyjack's face. Faintly through the dark night the fourth bell clanged. The sergeant pulled his raincape tighter and wearily shifted his stance. The view from the rooftop of the palace's east turret was mostly obscured by sheets of rain. 'You've been chewing on something for days,' he said, to the man beside him. 'Let's hear it, soldier.'

Fiddler wiped the rain from his eyes and squinted into the east. 'Not much to tell you, Sarge,' he said gruffly. 'Just feelings. That sorceress, for one.'

'Tattersail?'

'Yeah.' Metal clinked as the sapper unstrapped his sword belt. 'Hate this damned thing,' he muttered.

Whiskeyjack watched as the man tossed the belt and scabbarded shortsword to the rooftop's pebbled surface behind them. 'Just don't forget it like you did last time,' the sergeant said, hiding a grin.

Fiddler winced. 'Make one mistake and nobody lets you forget it.'

Whiskeyjack made no reply, though his shoulders shook with laughter.

'Hood's Bones,' Fiddler went on, 'I ain't no fighter. Not like that, anyway. Was born in an alley in Malaz City, learned the stone-cutting trade breaking into barrows up on the plain behind Mock's Hold.' He glanced up at his sergeant. 'You used to be a stone-cutter, too. Just like me. Only I'm no fast learner in soldiering like you was. It was the ranks or the mines for me – sometimes I think I went and made the wrong choice.'

Whiskeyjack's amusement died as a pang followed Fiddler's words. Learn what? he wondered. *How to kill people? How to send them off to die in some foreign land?* 'What's your feeling on Tattersail?' the sergeant asked curtly.

'Scared,' the sapper responded. 'She's got some old demons riding her, is my guess, and they're closing in.'

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'It's rare you'll find a mage with a pleasant past,' he said. 'Story goes she wasn't recruited, she was on the run. Then she messed up with her first posting.'

'It's bad timing her going all soft on us now.'

'She's lost her cadre. She's been betrayed. Without the Empire, what's she got to hold on to?' *What has any of us got?*

'It's like she's ready to cry, right on the edge, every single minute. I'm thinking she's lost her backbone, Sarge. If Tayschrenn puts her under his thumb, she's liable to squeal.'

'I think you've underestimated the sorceress, Fiddler,' Whiskeyjack said. 'She's a survivor – and loyal. It's not common news, but she's been offered the title of High Mage more than once and she won't accept. It doesn't show, but a head-to-head between her and Tayschrenn would be a close thing. She's a Master of her Warren, and you don't acquire that with a weak spine.'

Fiddler whistled softly, leaned his arms on the parapet. 'I stand corrected.'

'Anything else, Sapper?'

'Just one,' Fiddler replied, deadpan.

Whiskeyjack stiffened. He knew what that tone implied. 'Go on.'

'Something's about to be unleashed tonight, Sergeant.' Fiddler swung round, his eyes glittering in the darkness. 'It's going to be messy.'

Both men turned at the thumping of the roof's trap-door. High Fist Dujek Onearm emerged, the light from the room below a broken beacon rising around him. He cleared the ladder's last rung and stepped on to the roof. 'Give me a hand with this damn door here,' he called to the two men.

They strode over, their boots crunching on the gravel scatter. 'Any word on Captain Paran, High Fist?' Whiskeyjack asked, as Fiddler crouched over the trap-door and, with a grunt, levered it back into place.

'None,' Dujek said. 'He's disappeared. Then again so has that killer of yours, Kalam.'

Whiskeyjack shook his head. 'I know where he is, and where he's been all night. Hedge and Mallet were the last to see the captain, leaving Knob's Inn, and then he just seems to vanish. High Fist, we didn't kill this Captain Paran.'

'Don't quibble with words,' Dujek muttered. 'Damn it, Fiddler, is that your sword lying over there? In a *puddle?'*

Breath hissed between Fiddler's teeth and he hurried over to the weapon.

'The man's a hopeless legend,' Dujek said. 'Shedenul bless his hide.' He paused, seeming to reorder his thoughts. 'OK, perish the thought, then. You

didn't kill Paran. So where is he?'

'We're looking,' Whiskeyjack said tonelessly.

The High Fist sighed. 'All right. Understood. You want to know who else might be wanting Paran dead, and that means explaining who sent him. Well, he's Adjunct Lorn's man, has been for some time. He's not Claw, though. He's a bloody noble's son from Unta.'

Fiddler had donned his weapon and now stood twenty paces away at the roof's edge, hands on his hips. A *good man. They're all good, dammit.* Whiskeyjack blinked the rain from his eyes. 'From the capital? Could be someone in those circles. Nobody likes the old noble families, not even the nobles themselves.'

'It's possible,' Dujek conceded, without much conviction. 'In any case, he's to command your squad, and not for just this mission. The assignment's permanent.'

Whiskeyjack asked, 'Is the Darujhistan infiltration his own idea?'

The High Fist replied, 'No, but whose it is is anybody's guess. Maybe the Adjunct, maybe the Empress herself. So what all that means is we're sending you in anyway.' He scowled briefly. 'I'm to relay the final details to you.' He faced the sergeant. 'Assuming Paran is gone for good.'

'May I speak freely, High Fist?'

Dujek barked a laugh. 'You think I don't know it, Whiskeyjack? The plan stinks. A tactical nightmare—'

'I don't agree.'

'What?'

'I think it will do just as it was intended to do,' the sergeant said dully, his gaze at first on the lightening eastern horizon, then on the soldier standing at the roof's edge. *Because it is intended* to *get us all killed.*

The High Fist studied the sergeant's face, then he said, 'Come with me.' He led Whiskeyjack over to where Fiddler stood. The sapper gave them a

nod. A moment later all three stood looking down on the city. Pale's ill-lit streets wound between the rough blocks of buildings that seemed unwilling to yield the night; behind curtains of rain their squatting silhouettes appeared to shiver before the coming dawn.

After a while, Dujek said quietly, 'Damned lonely out here, isn't it?'

Fiddler grunted. 'That it is, sir.'

Whiskeyjack closed his eyes. Whatever was happening thousands of leagues away was being played out here. Such was Empire, and it always would be, no matter the place or the people. They were all instruments blind to the hands shaping them. The sergeant had faced that truth long ago. It had galled him then and it galled him now. The only relief, these days, seemed to come with exhaustion.

'There's pressure,' the High Fist continued slowly, 'to disband the Bridgeburners. I've already received the order to merge the Second with the Fifth and Sixth. We'll stand as the Fifth, near full complement. The tides are bringing new waters to our shore, gentlemen, and they smell bitter.' He hesitated, then said, 'If you and your squad come out of Darujhistan alive, Sergeant, you have my permission just to walk.'

Whiskeyjack's head snapped around and Fiddler stiffened.

Dujek nodded. 'You heard me. And as for the rest of the Bridgeburners, well, rest easy that I'll take care of them.' The High Fist glanced eastward, baring his teeth in a humourless grin. 'They're pushing me. But there's no way in hell they're going to leave me with no room to manoeuvre. I've got ten thousand soldiers I owe a lot to—'

'Excuse me, sir,' Fiddler cut in, 'there's ten thousand soldiers saying they're the ones owing. You say the word and—'

'Quiet,' Dujek warned.

'Yes, sir.'

Whiskeyjack remained silent, his thoughts a whirling maelstrom. Desertion. That word rang in his head like a dirge. And Fiddler's assertion

was, he felt, a true one. If High Fist Dujek decided it was time to make a move, the last place Whiskeyjack wanted to be was on the run hundreds of leagues away from the centre of things. He was too close to Dujek and, though they strove to hide it, the history between them ever churned beneath the surface. There'd been a time when Dujek had called Turn 'sir', and though Whiskeyjack held no grudges he knew that Dujek still had trouble accepting the change of fortunes. If the time came, Whiskeyjack intended to be at Onearm's side.

'High Fist,' he said at last, aware that both men had been waiting for him to speak, 'there's still a few Bridgeburners left. Fewer hands on the sword. But the sword's still sharp. It's not our style to make life easy for those who oppose us – whoever they happen to be. To just quietly walk away ...' The sergeant sighed. 'Well, that'd suit them, wouldn't it? While there's a hand on the sword, a single hand, the Bridgeburners won't back down. It settles on honour, I guess.'

'I hear you,' Dujek said. Then he grunted. 'Well, here they come.'

Whiskeyjack looked up, followed the High Fist's gaze into the eastern sky.

Quick Ben cocked his head, then hissed through his teeth. 'The Hounds have caught his trail,' he said.

Kalam cursed vehemently, surging to his feet.

Sitting on the bed, Tattersail frowned bleary-eyed at the bearish man as he paced, his footsteps on the floorboards barely raising a creak. Big as he was, Kalam seemed to glide, giving the scene an almost surreal feel, with the wizard cross-legged and hovering a few inches off the wooden floor in the room's centre.

Tattersail realized she was exhausted. Too much was happening, and it was happening all at once. She shook herself mentally and returned her attention to Quick Ben.

The wizard was linked to Hairlock, and the marionette had been on someone's – *something's* – trail, which led down into the Warren of Shadow. Hairlock had reached the very gates of the Shadow Realm, and then he had gone beyond.

For a time Quick Ben had lost contact with the puppet, and those long minutes of silence had left everyone's nerves in tatters. When Hairlock's presence returned to the wizard he no longer moved alone.

'He's coming out,' Quick Ben announced. 'Shifting Warrens. With Oponn's luck he'll lose the Hounds.'

Tattersail winced at the wizard's casual use of the Fool's name. With so many currents swirling so close beneath the surface it might well call unwelcome attention to them.

Weariness hung heavy in the room like bitter incense, redolent with sweat and tension. After his last words Quick Ben had bowed his head. Tattersail knew his mind now travelled the Warrens, clinging to Hairlock's shoulder with an unbreakable grip.

Kalam's pacing brought him before the sorceress. He stopped and faced her. 'What about Tayschrenn?' he asked gruffly, his hands twitching.

'He knows something has happened. He's hunting, but the quarry eludes him.' She smiled up at the assassin. 'I feel him moving cautiously. Very cautiously. For all he knows, the quarry might be a rabbit, or a wolf.'

Kalam's expression remained grim. 'Or a Hound,' he muttered, then resumed his pacing.

Tattersail stared at him. Was this what Hairlock was doing? Drawing a Hound after him? Were they all leading Tayschrenn into a deadly ambush? 'I trust not,' she said, her eyes hardening on the assassin. 'That would be foolish.'

Kalam ignored her, pointedly avoiding her gaze.

Tattersail rose. 'Not foolish. Insane. Do you realize what could be unleashed here? Some believe the Hounds are more ancient than the

Shadow Realm itself. But it's not just them – power draws power. If one Ascendant parts the fabric here and now, others will come, smelling blood. Come the dawn every mortal in this city could be dead.'

'Easy, lady,' Kalam said. 'Nobody wants a Hound loosed in the city. I spoke from fear.' He still would not look at her.

The assassin's admission startled Tattersail. It was shame that kept his eyes from her. Fear was an admission of weakness. 'For Hood's Sake,' she sighed, 'I've been sitting on a pillow for the past two hours.'

That caught him. He stopped, faced her, then laughed.

It was a deep, smooth laugh, and it pleased her immensely.

The bedroom door opened and Mallet entered the room, his round face shiny and flushed. The healer glanced briefly at Quick Ben, then walked to Tattersail, where he crouched down in front of her. 'By all rights,' he said quietly, 'Captain Paran should be in an Officer's Hole with five feet of mud on his pretty face.' He nodded to Kalam, who had joined them. 'The first wound was fatal, up under his heart. A professional thrust,' he added, with a meaningful look at the assassin. 'The second would have done him more slowly, but no less certain.'

Kalam grimaced. 'So he should be dead. He isn't. Which means?'

'Intervention,' Tattersail answered, a queasy feeling settling in her stomach. Her heavy-lidded gaze fixed on Mallet. 'Your Denul skills proved sufficient?'

The healer quirked a smile. 'It was easy. I had help.' He explained, 'The wounds were already closing, the damage already mended. I quickened it some, but that's all. There's been a deep trauma, both body and mind. By all rights it should be weeks before he recovers physically. And that alone could be a problem.'

'What do you mean?' Tattersail asked.

Kalam strode to the table, retrieved a jug of wine and three clay cups. He rejoined them and began pouring as Mallet said, 'Healing should never be

separated between the flesh and the sense of the flesh. It's hard to explain. The Denul Warrens involve every aspect of healing, since damage, when it occurs, does so on all levels. Shock is the scar that bridges the gap between the body and the mind.'

'All and well,' Kalam growled, handing the healer a cup. 'What about Paran?'

Mallet took a long draught and wiped at his mouth. 'Whatever force interceded cared for nothing but healing the flesh. He may well be on his feet in a day or two, but the shock needs time to heal.'

'You couldn't do it?' Tattersail asked.

He shook his head. 'All such things are intertwined. Whatever interceded severed those connections. How many shocks, traumatic events, has Paran received in his lifetime? Which scar am I to trace? I may well do more damage in my ignorance.'

Tattersail thought about the young man they had dragged into her room an hour earlier. After his scream in the alley, announcing to Picker that he still lived, he had fallen into unconsciousness. All that she knew of Paran was that he was a noble's son; that he'd come from Unta, and that he was the squad's new officer on their mission in Darujhistan.

'In any case,' Mallet said, draining his cup, 'Hedge is keeping an eye on him. He may come to any minute, but there's no telling what state his mind will be in.' The healer grinned at Kalam. 'Hedge has taken a liking to the brat.' His grin broadened as the assassin cursed.

Tattersail raised an eyebrow.

Seeing her expression, Mallet explained, 'Hedge also adopts stray dogs – and other, uh, needy creatures.' He glanced at Kalam, who had resumed pacing. 'And he can get stubborn about it, too.'

The corporal growled wordlessly.

Tattersail smiled. The smile faded as her thoughts returned to Captain Paran. 'He's going to be used,' she pronounced, flatly. 'Like a sword.'

Mallet sobered with her words. 'There's nothing of mercy in the healing, only calculation.'

Quick Ben's voice startled them all. 'The attempt on his life came from Shadow.'

There was silence in the room.

Tattersail sighed. Before, it had been just a suspicion. She saw Mallet and Kalam exchange glances, and guessed at what passed between them. Wherever Sorry was, when she returned to the fold there would be some hard questions. And Tattersail now knew – with certainty – that the girl belonged to Shadow.

'And that means,' Quick Ben resumed blithely, 'that whoever interceded on Paran's behalf is now in direct opposition with the Realm of Shadow.' His head turned, dark eyes fixing on the sorceress. 'We'll need to know what Paran knows, whenever he comes around. Only—'

'We won't be here,' Kalam finished.

'As if Hairlock wasn't enough,' Tattersail muttered, 'now you want me nursing this captain of yours.'

Quick Ben rose, brushing the dust from his leather leggings. 'Hairlock will be gone for some time. Those Hounds are stubborn. It may be a while before he can shake them. Or, if the worst comes to the worst,' the wizard grinned darkly, 'he'll turn on them and give the Shadow Lord something to think about.'

Kalam said to Mallet, 'Gather up Hedge. We've got to move.'

Quick Ben's last comment left Tattersail cold. She grimaced at the ashen taste in her mouth, and watched in silence as the squad prepared to leave. They had a mission ahead of them, one that would take them right into the heart of Darujhistan. That city was the next on the Empire's list, the last Free City, the continent's lone gem worthy enough to covet. The squad would infiltrate, prepare the way. They'd be entirely on their own. In a strange way, Tattersail almost envied the isolation they were about to enter. Almost, but not quite. She feared they would all die.

The Mason's Barrow returned to her thoughts as if raised by her own fears. It was, she realized, big enough to hold them all.

With dawn a blade-thin crimson streak at their backs, the Black Moranth, crouching on the high saddles of their Quorl mounts, glittered like diamonds slick with blood. Whiskeyjack, Fiddler and the High Fist watched the dozen fliers approach. Overhead the rain had lessened, and around the nearby rooftops smudges of grey mist sank down to scuff stone and tile.

'Where's your squad, Sergeant?' Dujek asked.

Whiskeyjack nodded at Fiddler, who turned and headed back to the trap-door. 'They'll be here,' the sergeant answered.

The sparkling, skin-thin wings of the Quorl, four to each creature, seemed to flip for the briefest of moments, and as one the twelve Moranth descended towards the turret's rooftop. The sharp whirring sound of the wings was punctuated by the clicked commands of the Moranth riders as they called out to each other. They swept over the heads of the two men with a bare five feet to spare, and without ceremony landed behind them.

Fiddler had disappeared into the room below. Dujek, his hand on his hip, glared at the Moranth for a moment before grumbling something inaudible and making his way to the trap-door.

Whiskeyjack walked up to the nearest Moranth. A black chitin visor covered the soldier's face, and it turned towards the sergeant in silent regard. 'There was one among you,' Whiskeyjack said, 'one-handed. He was five times marked for valour. Does he still live?'

The Black Moranth did not reply.

The sergeant shrugged and turned his attention to the Quorls. Though he had ridden their backs before, they continued to fascinate him. The winged creatures balanced on four thin legs emerging from beneath the saddles. They waited on the rooftop with wings splayed out and quivering fast enough to create a haze of water droplets suspended around them. Their long, oddly segmented tails jutted straight out behind them, multi-hued and

twenty feet in length. Whiskeyjack's nostrils twitched as the now familiar acrid scent reached him. The nearest Quorl's enormous, wedge-shaped head was dominated by faceted eyes and articulating mandibles. Two additional limbs – arms, he supposed – were tucked underneath. As he stared the Quorl's head swivelled until its left eye faced him squarely.

The sergeant continued staring, wondering what the Quorl was seeing, wondering what it was thinking – if it thought at all. Curious, he gave the Quorl a nod.

The head cocked, then turned away. Whiskeyjack's eyes widened to see the tip of the Quorl's tail curl up briefly. It was the first time he had seen such a motion.

The alliance between the Moranth and the Empire had changed the face of Imperial war. The Malazan tactics here on Genabackis had twisted into a new shape, one increasingly dependent on transport by air of both soldiers and supplies. Such dependency was dangerous, as far as Whiskeyjack was concerned. We *know so little about these* Moranth – *no one has ever seen their cities in the forest. 1 can't even tell their sex.* Most scholars held that they were true humans, but there was no way to tell – the Moranth collected their own dead from the battlefields. There would be trouble in the Empire if the Moranth ever exercised a thirst for power. From what he had heard, however, the various colour factions among them marked an ever-changing hierarchy, and the rivalry and competition remained at a fanatical pitch.

High Fist Dujek marched back to Whiskeyjack's side, his hard expression softened slightly with relief. From the trap-door, voices rose in argument. 'They've arrived,' Dujek said. 'Giving your new recruit an earful about something – and don't tell me what because I don't want to know.'

Whiskeyjack's momentary relief was shattered by what he only now realized was the secret hope that Sorry had deserted. So his men had found her after all, or she had found them. Either way, his veterans did not sound happy to see her. He couldn't blame them. Had she tried to kill Paran? That seemed to be the suspicion of Quick Ben and Kalam.

Kalam was doing most of the bellowing, putting more into his role as corporal than was warranted, and Dujek's searching glance at Whiskeyjack was enough to push him towards the trap-door. He came to the edge and glared down into the room below. Everyone was there, standing in a menacing circle around Sorry, who leaned against the ladder as if bored by the whole proceedings.

'Quiet!' Whiskeyjack roared down. 'Check your supplies and get up here, now!' He watched them scamper, then gave a satisfied nod and returned to where the High Fist waited.

Dujek was rubbing the stump of his left arm, frowning distractedly. 'Damn this weather,' he muttered.

'Mallet could ease that,' Whiskeyjack said.

'Not necessary,' Dujek replied. 'I'm just getting old.' He scratched his jaw. 'All of your heavy supplies have been delivered to the drop point. Ready to fly, Sergeant?'

Whiskeyjack eyed the ridged second saddles on the Quorl where they rose up at the back of the thorax like cowls, then nodded sharply.

They watched as the squad members emerged from the square doorway, each wearing a raincape and burdened with a heavy pack. Fiddler and Hedge were engaged in a whispering argument, the latter casting a glare back at Trotts who'd trodden on his heel. The Barghast had attached his entire collection of charms, trinkets and trophies to various parts of his burly body, looking like a bedecked leadwood tree during the Kanese Fete of the Scorpions. Barghast were known for their odd sense of humour. Quick Ben and Kalam flanked Sorry, both men glowering and on edge, while Sorry, ignoring everyone, slowly made her way to the waiting Quorls. Her satchel was no bigger than a bedroll, and the raincape she wore was more like a cloak – not standard issue – reaching down to her ankles. She'd raised the hood. Despite the dawn's burgeoning light her face remained in shadow. This *is all* I *have left.* Whiskeyjack sighed.

Dujek asked quietly, 'How is she doing, Sergeant?'

'Still breathing,' Whiskeyjack replied stonily.

The High Fist slowly shook his head. 'So damn young these days ...'

A memory returned to Whiskeyjack as he considered Dujek's words. On a brief attachment to the 5th, away from the siege at Pale, in the midst of the Mott Campaign, Sorry had joined them from the new troops arriving at Nathilog. He'd watched her put a knife to three local mercenaries they'd taken prisoner in Greydog – ostensibly to glean information but, he recalled with a shudder, it had been nothing like that. Not an act of expedience. He had stared aghast, horrified, as Sorry set to work on their loins. He remembered meeting Kalam's gaze, and the desperate gesture that sent the black man surging forward, knives bared. Kalam had pushed past Sorry and with three quick motions had laid open the men's throats. And then came the moment that still twisted Whiskeyjack's heart. In their last, frothing words, the mercenaries had *blessed* Kalam.

Sorry had merely sheathed her weapon, then walked away.

Though the woman had been with the squad for two years, still his men called her a recruit, and they would probably do so until the day they died. There was a meaning there, and Whiskeyjack understood it well. Recruits were not Bridge-burners. The stripping away of that label was an earned thing, a recognition brought by deeds. Sorry was a recruit because the thought of having her inextricably enfolded within the Bridgeburners burned like a hot knife in the throat of everyone in his squad. And that was something to which the sergeant himself was not immune.

As all of this flashed through Whiskeyjack's thoughts, his usually impassive expression failed him. In his head, he replied: Young? No, you can forgive the young, you can answer their simple needs, and you can look in their eyes and find enough there that is recognizable. But her? No. Best to avoid those eyes, in which there was nothing that was young – nothing at all.

'Let's get you moving,' Dujek growled. 'Mount everyone up.' The High Fist turned to say a few last words to the sergeant, but what he saw in Whiskeyjack's face killed those words in his throat.

Two muted thunderclaps sounded in the city as the east spread its crimson cloak skyward, the first report followed scant minutes later by the second. The last of the night's tears churned down gunnels and swirled along street gutters. Muddy puddles filled potholes, reflecting the thinning clouds overhead with an opaque cast. Among the narrow crooked alleys of Pale's Krael Quarter, the chill and damp of the night clung to the dark spaces with tenacity. Here, the mould-laden bricks and worn cobbles had swallowed the second thunderclap, leaving no echo to challenge the patter of water droplets.

Down one aisle, winding south along the outer wall, loped a dog the size of a mule. Its massive head was slung low forward in front of the broad, bunched muscles of its shoulders. That it had seen a night without rain was marked by its dusty, dry, mottled grey and black fur. The animal's muzzle was speckled with grey, and its eyes glowed amber.

The Hound, marked Seventh among Shadowthrone's servants and called Gear, hunted. The quarry was elusive, cunning, and swift in its flight. Yet Gear felt close. He knew that it was no human he tracked – no mortal man or woman could have escaped his jaws for so long. Even more astonishing, Gear had yet to catch a glimpse of the quarry. But it had trespassed, with impunity it had entered the Shadow Realm, trailing Shadowthrone himself and strumming all the webs Gear's lord had spun. The only answer to such an affront was death.

Soon, the Hound knew, *he* would be the hunted one, and if those hunters came in numbers and in strength Gear would be hard pressed to continue his search. There were those within the city who had felt the savage partings of the fabric. And less than a minute after passing through the Warren's gate Gear's hackles had stiffened, telling him of nearby magic's burgeoning. Thus far the Hound had eluded detection, but that would not last.

He moved silent and cautiously through the maze of shanties and lean-tos crouching against the city wall, ignoring the occasional denizen come out to taste the dawn's rain-cleansed air. He stepped over the beggars sprawled in

his path. Local dogs and ratters gave him one glance then slunk away, ears flattened and tail sweeping the muddy ground.

As Gear rounded the corner of a sunken stone house the morning breeze brought his head round. He paused, eyes searching down the street opposite him. Mist drifted here and there, and the first carts of the lesser merchants were being pulled out by figures wrapped warm against the chill – the Hound was running out of time.

Gear's eyes travelled down the length of the street, focusing on a large, walled estate at the far end. Four soldiers lounged before its gate, watching passers-by with little interest and talking among themselves. Gear's head lifted, his study finding a shuttered window on the estate's second floor.

Anticipation and pleasure surged through the Hound. He had found the trail's end. Lowering his head again, he moved, his gaze unwavering on the four guards.

The shift had ended. As the new marines approached they both noticed that the gate was unlocked, ajar.

'What's this?' one asked, eyeing the two drawn faces of the soldiers who stood against the wall.

'It's been that kind of night,' the elder responded. 'The kind where you don't ask questions.'

The two new men exchanged glances, then the one who had spoken gave the older man a nod and a grin. 'I know the kind. Well, get on, then. Your cots are waiting.'

The older man shifted his pike and seemed to sag. His gaze flicked to his partner, but the young man had his attention on something up the street. 'I'd guess it's too late now,' the older man said to the newcomers, 'meaning it won't happen and so it don't matter, but if a woman shows up, a Bridgeburner, you let her through and keep your eyes on the walls.'

'Look at that dog,' the younger soldier said.

'We hear you,' said the new man. 'Life in the Second—'

'Look at that dog,' the young marine repeated.

The others turned to look up the street. The old guard stared, his eyes widening, then he hissed a curse and fumbled with his pike. None of the others managed even that much before the Hound was upon them.

Sleepless, Tattersail lay flat on her back on the bed in the outer room. Her exhaustion had reached a point where even sleep eluded her so she stared at the ceiling, her thoughts wandering in a disordered review of the past seven days. Despite her initial anger at being embroiled in the Bridgeburners' schemes, she had to acknowledge the excitement she felt.

The desire to collect her possessions and open a Warren, away from the Empire, away from Hairlock's madness and hunger, away from the field of an endless war, now seemed an ancient one, born of a desperation she no longer felt.

But it was more than just a renewed sense of humanity that compelled her to stay to see it through – the Bridgeburners, after all, had shown again and again that they could take care of their own affairs. No, she wanted to see Tayschrenn *pulled down.* It was a truth that frightened her. Hunger for vengeance poisoned the soul. And it was likely that she would have to wait a long time to see Tayschrenn's just demise. She wondered if, having fed on that poison for so long, she might not end up viewing the world with Hairlock's shining bright mad eyes.

'Too much,' she muttered. 'Too much all at once.'

A sound at the door startled her. She sat up. 'Oh,' she said, scowling, 'you've returned.'

'Safe and sound,' Hairlock said. 'Sorry to disappoint you, 'Sail.' The marionette waved one tiny, gloved hand and the door behind him closed, its latch falling into place. 'Much feared, these Hounds of Shadow,' he said, sauntering into the room's centre and pirouetting once before sitting down, legs splayed and arms hanging limp. He sniggered. 'But in the end nothing

more than glorified mutts, stupid and slow and sniffing at every tree. Finding naught of sly Hairlock.'

Tattersail leaned back and closed her eyes. 'Quick Ben was displeased by your sloppiness.'

'Fool!' Hairlock spat. 'I leave him to his watching, I leave him convinced that such knowledge has power over me while I go where I choose. He eagerly lays claim to commanding me, a foolishness I give him now, to make my vengeance sweeter.'

She had heard it all before and knew he was working on her, seeking to weaken her resolve. Unfortunately he was succeeding in part, for she felt doubt. Maybe Hairlock was telling the truth: maybe Quick Ben had already lost him, yet remained ignorant of the fact. 'Keep your vengeance for the man who stole your legs and then your body,' Tattersail said drily. 'Tayschrenn still mocks you.'

'He'll pay first!' Hairlock shrieked. Then he hunched down, gripping his sides. 'One thing at a time,' he whispered.

From the compound beyond the window came the first screams.

Tattersail bolted upright as Hairlock shouted: 'Found! I mustn't be seen, woman!'

The marionette leaped to his feet and scurried to his box against the far wall. 'Destroy the Hound – you've no choice!' Scrambling, he opened the box and climbed inside. The lid thudded into place and the nimbus of a protective spell suffused it.

Tattersail stood by the bed, hesitating. Wood shattered below and the building shook. Men shrieked, weapons clanged. The sorceress pushed herself upright, terror seeping into her limbs like molten lead. *Destroy a Hound of Shadow?* Heavy thumps rattled the window, as of bodies being flung aside on the floor below, then the thumps reached the foot of the stairs, and the screaming stopped. From the compound she heard soldiers shouting.

Tattersail drew on her Thyr Warren. Power swept into her and pushed aside the paralysing fear. She straightened, all exhaustion gone, and swung her gaze on the door. Wood creaked, then the timber panel exploded inwards, as if flung from a catapult, and was instantly buffeted aside by Tattersail's magical shield. The twin impacts shattered it, flinging shards and splinters against the ceiling and walls. Glass broke behind her, the window's shutters springing open. An icy wind roiled into the room.

The Hound appeared, its eyes yellow flames, the muscles of its high shoulders taut, rippling under its skin. The creature's power swept like a wave over Tattersail and she drew a sharp breath. The Hound was *old,* older than anything she had ever encountered. It paused in the doorway, sniffing the air, blood dripping from its black lips. Then its gaze fixed on the iron-bound box against the wall to Tattersail's left. The beast stepped forward.

'No,' she said.

The Hound froze. Its massive head swung slow and measured to her, as if it was noticing her for the first time. Its lips peeled back to reveal the luminescent gleam of canines the length of a man's thumb.

Damn you, Hairlock! I *need your help! Please!*

A white strip flashed above the Hound's eyes as the lids snapped back. It charged.

The attack was so swift that Tattersail was unable to raise her hands before the beast was upon her, surging through her outer magic as if it was no more than a brisk wind. Her closest defences, a layering of High Wards, met the Hound's charge like a stone wall. She felt cracks streak outwards, deep fissures reaching through to her arms and chest with a snapping sound immediately replaced by spurting blood. This, and the Hound's momentum, flung her back through the air. The wards at her back cushioned the blow as she hit the wall beside the window. Mortar puffed into the air around her, and fragments of crushed brick scattered across the floor.

The Hound had fallen to its knees. Shaking its head, it regained its feet, snorted, then attacked again.

Tattersail, her wits rocked by the first charge, weakly lifted one blood-streaked arm before her face, unable to do anything else.

As the Hound sprang into the air, jaws open and reaching for her head, a wave of grey light struck the beast in the side, throwing it into the bed to Tattersail's right. Wood crunched. With a grunt the Hound was up again, wheeling this time to face Hairlock, who stood perched atop his box, glistening with sweat and arms raised. 'Oh, yes, Gear,' he shrilled. 'I'm your quarry!'

Tattersail slumped, then leaned to one side and vomited on the floor. A chaotic Warren swirled in the room, a miasma that churned into her like riotous pestilence. It radiated from Hairlock in visible pulses of grainy grey shot through with black.

The Hound eyed Hairlock, its sides heaving. It was as if it was trying to dispel the waves of power from its brain. A low growl rumbled in its chest – its first sound. The wide head sagged.

Tattersail stared, then understanding struck a hammer blow to her chest. 'Hound!' she screamed. 'He's reaching for your soul! Escape! *Get out of here!'*

The beast's growl deepened, but it did not move.

None of the three noticed the door to the inner bedroom opening off to the left, or the halting appearance of Captain Paran, wrapped in the colourless woollen blanket that covered him down to his ankles. Pale and drawn, the man moved forward, a blank cast to his eyes, which were fixed on the Hound. As the invisible battle of wills continued between Gear and Hairlock, Paran stepped closer.

The movement caught Tattersail's eye. She opened her mouth to shout a warning, but Paran moved first. The blanket parted to reveal a longsword, point flashing outward as he extended into a full lunge. The sword sank into Gear's chest, even as the man leaped back, withdrawing the lunge, twisting the weapon as he pulled it clear. A bellow thundered from Gear's throat. The Hound staggered back into the ruins of the bed, biting at the wound gushing blood from its side.

Hairlock screamed in rage and jumped forward, closing in on Gear.

Tattersail scythed one foot into the puppet's path, flinging him against the far wall.

Gear howled. A dark rift opened around him with the sound of tearing burlap. He whirled and plunged into the deepening shadow. The rent closed and was gone, leaving in its wake a rippling of cold air.

Astonished beyond her pain, Tattersail swung her attention to Captain Paran and the bloodied sword in his hands. 'How?' she gasped. 'How could you have pierced the Hound's magic? Your sword—'

The captain looked down at it. 'Just lucky, I suppose.'

'Oponn!' Hairlock hissed, as he regained his feet, and glared at Tattersail. 'Hood's Curse on the Fools! And you, woman, this I'll not forget. You will pay – I swear it!'

Tattersail looked away and sighed. A smile touched her lips as words uttered earlier now returned with new, grim meaning. 'You'll be too busy staying alive, Hairlock, to start on me. You've given Shadowthrone something to think about. And you'll live to regret his attention, puppet. Deny that if you dare.'

'I'm returning to my box,' Hairlock said, scrambling. 'Expect Tayschrenn here in minutes. You'll say nothing, Sorceress.' He clambered inside. 'Nothing.' The lid slammed shut.

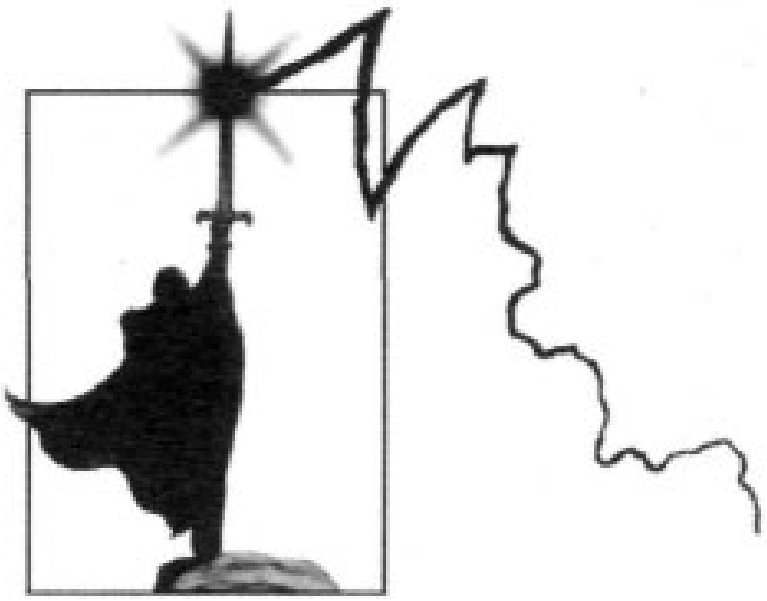
Tattersail's smile broadened, the taste of blood in her mouth like an omen, a silent, visible warning to Hairlock of things to come – a warning she knew he couldn't see. That made the taste almost sweet.

She tried to move, but it seemed that a chill had come to her limbs. Within her mind visions floated, but walls of darkness closed in around them before they could register. She felt herself fading.

A man's voice spoke close by, urgent. 'What do you hear?'

She frowned, trying to concentrate. Then she smiled. 'A spinning coin. I hear a spinning coin.'

BOOK TWO



DARUJHISTAN

What windfall has brushed our senses?
This rocking thunderhead that scraped
the lake's placid waters
and spun a single day's shadows
like a wheel that rolled us
from dawn to dusk, while we
tottered our tender ways ...

What windlass crackles dire warnings?
There in the gentle swells that tossed
a bobbing cork our way
with its fine magenta scent wafting
like a panoply of petals
that might be ashes
in twilight's crimson smear ...

Rumour Born
Fisher (b.?}

CHAPTER FIVE

And if this man sees you in his dreams,
while you rock in the season's
brooding night
'neath a tree's stout branch,
and your shadow is hooded
above the knotted rope,
so will the winds of his passing
twitch your stiffened limbs
into some semblance of running ...

Rumour Born
Fisher (b.?)

907th Year in the Third Millennium
The Season of Fanderay in the year of the Five Tusks
Two thousand years since the birth of Darujhistan, the city

In his dream the small round man found himself leaving the city of Darujhistan through Two Ox Gate as he headed towards the setting sun. The tattered tails of his faded red waistcoat flapped in his haste. He had no idea how far he would have to walk. Already his feet ached.

There were miseries in the world, and then there was *misery.* In times of conscience he held the world's concerns above his own. Fortunately, he reflected, such times were few, and this, he told himself, was not one of them.

'Alas, the very same dream propels these many-toed implements beneath these wobbly knees.' He sighed. 'Ever the same dream.' And so it was. He saw before him the sun riding the distant hilltop, a copper disc through woodsmoke haze. His feet carried him down the winding dirt street of Gadrobi Shantytown, the shacks and huts on either side crouching in the

gathering gloom. Old men wrapped in the dingy yellow rags of lepers squatted over nearby cookfires, falling silent as he passed. Similarly clad women stood by the muddy well, pausing in their endless dunking of cats – a bemusing activity, its symbolism lost on the man as he hurried past.

He crossed Maiten River bridge, passed through the dwindling Gadrobi Herder camps, out on to the open road flanked by vineyard plantations. He lingered here, thinking of the wine these succulent grapes would produce. But dreams carried on with their own momentum, and the thought was but fleeting in its passage.

He knew his mind was in flight – fleeing the doomed city at his back, fleeing the dark, brooding smudge in the sky above it; but most of all, fleeing all that he knew and all that he was.

For some, the talent they possessed found its channel through a toss of knucklebones, the reading of heat fractures in scapulae, or the Fatid of the Deck of Dragons. For Kruppe, he had no need of any such affectations. The power of divination was in his head and he could not deny it, no matter how hard he tried. Within the walls of his skull rang the dirge of prophecy, and it echoed through his bones.

He muttered under his breath. 'Of course this is a dream, the flight of sleep. Perhaps, thinks Kruppe, he will in truth escape this time. None could call Kruppe a fool, after all. Fat with sloth and neglect, yes; inclined to excesses, indeed, somewhat clumsy with a bowl of soup, most certainly. But not a fool. Such times are upon us when the wise man must choose. Is it not wisdom to conclude that other lives are of less importance than one's own? Of course, very wise. Yes, Kruppe is wise.'

He paused to catch his breath. The hills and the sun before him seemed no closer. Such were dreams like the hastening of youth into adulthood, a precipitous course one could never turn back on – but who mentioned youth? Or one youth in particular? 'Surely not wise Kruppe! His mind wanders – Kruppe excuses the pun magnanimously – racked by the misery of his soles, which are tired, nay, half worn out from this reckless pace. Blisters have already appeared, no doubt. The foot cries out for a warm, soapy balm. Its companion joins in the chorus. Ah! Such a litany! Such a

wail of despair! Cease complaining, dear wings of flight. How far is the sun, anyway? Just beyond the hills, Kruppe is certain. No more than that, surely. Yes, as certain as an ever-spinning coin – but who spoke of coins? Kruppe proclaims his innocence!'

A breeze swept into his dream, down from the north carrying with it the smell of rain. Kruppe began fastening his threadbare coat. He drew in his belly in an effort to secure the last two buttons, but succeeded in clasping only one. 'Even in sleep,' he groaned, 'guilt makes its point.'

He blinked against the wind. 'Rain? But the year has just begun! Does it rain in the spring? Kruppe has never before concerned himself with such mundane matters. Perhaps this scent is no more than the lake's own breath. Yes, indeed. The question is settled.' He squinted at the dark ridge of clouds above Lake Azur.

'Must Kruppe run? Nay, where is his pride? His dignity? Not once have they shown their faces in Kruppe's dreams. Is there no shelter on yon road? Ah, Kruppe's feet are flailed, his soles bloodied shreds of throbbing flesh! What's this?'

Up ahead was a crossroads. A building squatted on a low rise just beyond. Candlelight bled from its shuttered windows.

Kruppe smiled. 'Of course, an inn. Far has the journey been, clear the need for a place of rest and relaxation for the weary traveller. Such as Kruppe, wizened adventurer with more than a few leagues under his belt, not to mention spanning it.' He hurried forward.

A broad, bare-limbed tree marked the crossroads. From one heavy branch something long and wrapped in burlap swung creaking in the wind. Kruppe spared it but the briefest glance. He came to the path and began his ascent.

'Ill judgement, pronounces Kruppe. Inns for the dusty journeyman should not sit atop hills. The curse of climbing is discovering how great the distance yet to climb. A word to the proprietor shall be necessary. Once sweet ale has soothed the throat, slabs of juicy red meat and broiled yams eased the gullet, and clean, anointed bandages clothed the feet. Such repairs must take precedence over flaws in planning such as Kruppe sees here.'

His monologue fell away, replaced by gasps as he struggled up the path. When he arrived at the door Kruppe was so winded that he did not even so much as look up, merely pushed against the weathered panel until it swung inward with a squeal of rusty hinges. 'Alas!' he cried, pausing to brush the sleeves of his coat. 'A foamy tankard for this ...' His voice died as he surveyed the array of grimy faces turned to him. 'Methinks the business is poor,' he mumbled. The place was indeed an inn – or it had been, perhaps a century past. ' 'Tis rain in the night air,' he said, to the half-dozen beggars crouched around a thick tallow candle set on the earthen floor.

One of the fellows nodded. 'We will grant you audience, hapless one.' He waved at a straw mat. 'Be seated and entertain our presence.'

Kruppe raised an eyebrow. 'Kruppe is graced by your invitation, sire.' He dipped his head, then strode forward. 'But, please, do not think he is bereft of contributions to this honoured gathering.' He sat down cross-legged, grunting with the effort, and faced the one who had spoken. 'He would break bread with you all.' From a sleeve he withdrew a small rye loaf. A bread knife appeared in his other hand. 'Known to friends and strangers alike is Kruppe, the man now seated before you. Inhabitant of yon glittering Darujhistan, the mystic jewel of Genabackis, the juicy grape ripe for picking.' He produced a chunk of goat cheese and smiled broadly at the faces before him. 'And this is his dream.'

'So it is,' the beggars' spokesman said, his lined face crinkling with amusement. 'It ever pleases us when we taste your particular flavour, Kruppe of Darujhistan. And always are we pleased at your travelling appetites.'

Kruppe laid down the rye loaf and cut slices. 'Kruppe has always considered you mere aspects of himself, a half-dozen Hungers among many, as it were. Yet, for all your needs, you would urge what of your master? That he turn back from his flight, of course. That one's own skull is too worthy a chamber for deception to reign – and yet Kruppe assures you from long experience that all deceit is born in the mind and there it is nurtured while virtues starve.'

The spokesman accepted a slice of bread and smiled. 'Perhaps we are your virtues, then.'

Kruppe paused to study the cheese in his hand. 'A thought Kruppe has not considered before now, mingling with the silent observation of mould on this cheese. But alas, the subject is in danger of being lost within the maze of such semantics. Nor can beggars be choosers when it comes to cheese. You have returned once again, and Kruppe knows why, as he has already explained with admirable equanimity.'

'The Coin spins, Kruppe, still spins.' The spokesman's face lost its humour.

Kruppe sighed. He handed the chunk of goat cheese to the man seated on his right. 'Kruppe hears it,' he conceded wearily. 'He cannot help but hear it. An endless ringing that sings in the head. And for all that Kruppe has seen, for all that he suspects to be, he is just Kruppe, a man who would challenge the gods in their own game.'

'Perhaps we are your Doubts,' the spokesman said, 'which you have never been afraid to face before, as you do now. Yet even we seek to turn you back, even we demand that you strive for the life of Darujhistan, for the life of your many friends, and for the life of the youth at whose feet the Coin shall fall.'

'It falls this very night,' Kruppe said. The six beggars nodded at this, though mostly they remained intent on the bread and cheese. 'Shall Kruppe accept this challenge, then? What are gods, after all, if not the perfect victims?' He smiled, raising his hands and fluttering his fingers. 'For Kruppe, whose sleight of hand is matched only by his sleight of mind? Perfect victims of confidence, claims Kruppe, ever blinded by arrogance, ever convinced of infallibility. Is it not a wonder that they have survived this long?'

The spokesman nodded and said, around a mouthful of cheese, 'Perhaps we are your Gifts, then. Wasting away, as it were.'

'Possibly,' Kruppe said, his eyes narrowing. 'Yet only one of you speaks.'

The beggar paused to swallow, then he laughed, his eyes dancing in the candlelight. 'Perhaps the others have yet to find their voice, Kruppe. They await only their master's command.'

'My,' Kruppe sighed, as he prepared to stand, 'but Kruppe is full of surprises.'

The spokesman looked up. 'You return to Darujhistan?'

'Of course,' Kruppe replied, gaining his feet with a heartfelt groan. 'He merely stepped out for a breath of night air, so much cleaner beyond the city's crumbling walls, don't you agree? Kruppe must needs exercise to hone his already prodigious skills. A walk in his sleep. This night,' he said, hitching his thumbs in his belt, 'the Coin falls. Kruppe must take his place in the centre of things. He returns to his bed, the night still young.' His eyes travelled among the beggars. All seemed to have gained weight, a healthy robust colour to their upturned faces. Kruppe sighed with satisfaction. 'It has, pronounces Kruppe, been a pleasure, gentlemen. Next time, however, let us settle on an inn that is not on a hilltop. Agreed?'

The spokesman smiled. 'Ah, but, Kruppe, Gifts are not easily attained, nor are Virtues, nor are Doubts easily overcome, and Hungers are ever the impetus to climbing.'

Kruppe's eyes narrowed on the man. 'Kruppe is too clever by far,' he muttered.

He left their company and shut the creaking door softly behind him. Returning down the path he came to the cross-roads and stopped in front of the burlap-wrapped figure swinging from the branch. Kruppe planted his fists on his hips and studied it. 'I know who you are,' he said jovially. 'The final aspect of Kruppe to complete this dream's array of those faces facing him which are Kruppe's own. Or so you would proclaim. You are Humility but, as everyone knows, Humility has no place in Kruppe's life, remember that. So here you will stay.' With that he moved his gaze to the great city lighting the eastern sky blue and green. 'Ah, this wondrous fiery gem that is Darujhistan is home to Kruppe. And that,' he added, as he began to walk, 'is as it should be.'

From the wharf sprawled along the shore of the lake, upward along the stepped tiers of the Gadrobi and Daru Districts, among the temple complexes and the Higher Estates, to the summit of Majesty Hill where gathers the city's Council, the rooftops of Darujhistan presented flat tops, arched gables, coned towers, belfries and platforms crowded in such chaotic profusion as to leave all but the major streets for ever hidden from the sun.

The torches marking the more frequented alleyways were hollow shafts that gripped pumice stones with fingers of blackened iron. Fed through ancient pitted copper pipes, gas hissed balls of flame around the porous stones, an uneven fire that cast a blue and green light. The gas was drawn from great caverns beneath the city and channelled by massive valves. Attending these works were the Greyfaces, silent men and women who moved like spectres beneath the city's cobbled streets.

For nine hundred years the breath of gas had fed at least one of the city's districts. Though pipes had been sundered by raging tenement fires and gouts of flame reached hundreds of feet into the sky, the Greyfaces had held on, twisting the shackles and driving their invisible dragon to its knees.

Beneath the rooftops was an underworld forever bathed in a blue glow. Such light marked the major avenues and the oft-frequented, narrow and crooked thoroughways of the markets. In the city, however, over twenty thousand alleys, barely wide enough for a two-wheeled cart, remained in shadow broken only by the occasional torch-bearing citizen or the globed lanterns of the City Watch.

By day the rooftops were bright and hot beneath the sun, crowded with the fluttering flags of domestic life drying in the lake wind. By night, the stars and moon illuminated a world webbed with empty clothes-lines and the chaotic shadows they cast.

On this night a figure wove around the hemp ropes and through the faint shadows. Overhead, a sickle moon sliced its way between thin clouds like a god's scimitar. The figure wore soot-stained cloth wrapped snugly about its torso and limbs, and its face was similarly hidden, leaving only space

enough for its eyes, which scanned the nearby rooftops. A black leather harness criss-crossed the figure's chest, bearing pockets and tight, stiff loops holding tools of the trade: coils of copper wire, iron files, three metal saws each wrapped in oiled parchment, root gum and a squared lump of tallow, a spool of fishing string, a thin-bladed dagger and a throwing knife both sheathed under the figure's left arm, pommels facing forward.

The tips of the thief's moccasins had been soaked in pitch. As he crossed the flat rooftop he was careful not to lower his full weight on his toes, leaving mostly intact the half-inch strip of sticky tar. He came to the building's edge and looked down. Three flights below crouched a small garden, faintly lit by four gas lamps set at each corner of a flagstoned patio that encircled a fountain. A purple glow clung to the foliage encroaching on the patio, and glimmered on the water trickling down a series of stone tiers to the fountain's shallow pool. On a bench beside the fountain sat a guard reclined in sleep, a spear across his knees.

The D'Arle estate was a popular topic among the higher circles of Darujhistan's nobility, specifically for the eligibility of the family's youngest daughter. Many had been the suitors, many the gifts of gems and baubles that now resided in the young maiden's bedroom.

While such stories were passed like the sweetest bread in the upper circles, few of the commonry paid attention when the tales trickled down into their company. But there were those who listened carefully indeed, possessive and mute with their thoughts yet oddly eager for details.

His gaze on the dozing house guard in the garden below, the mind of Crokus Younghand picked its way carefully through speculations of what was to come. The key lay in finding out which room among the estate's score of chambers belonged to the maiden. Crokus did not like guesswork, but he'd found that his thoughts, carried almost entirely on instinct, moved with their own logic when determining these things.

Top floor most assuredly for the youngest and fairest daughter of the D'Arles. And with a balcony overlooking the garden.

He turned his attention from the guard to the wall immediately beneath him. Three balconies, but only one, off to the left, was on the third floor. Crokus pulled back from the edge and slipped silently along the roof until he judged he was directly above the balcony, then he approached again and looked down.

Ten feet, at the most. On either side of the balcony rose ornately carved columns of painted wood. A half-moon arch spanned them an arm's length down, completing the fancy frame. With a final glance at the house guard, who had not moved, and whose spear did not seem in danger of clattering to the flagstones at any moment, Crokus slowly lowered himself down the wall.

His moccasins' pitch gripped the eaves with snug assurance. There were plenty of handholds, as the carver had cut deep into the hardwood, and sun, rain and wind had weathered the paint. He descended along one of the columns until his feet touched the balcony's handrail where it abutted the wall. A moment later he crouched on the glazed tiles in the shadow of a wrought-iron table and pillowed chair.

No light leaked between the shutters of the sliding door. Two soft steps brought him next to it. A moment's examination identified the style of the latch's lock. Crokus withdrew a fine-toothed saw and set to work. The sound the tool made was minimal, no more than the shivering of a locust's leg. A fine tool, rare and probably expensive. Crokus was fortunate in having an uncle who dabbled in alchemy and had need of such magically hardened tools when constructing his bizarre condensing and filtering mechanisms. Better yet, an absent-minded uncle prone to misplacing things.

Twenty minutes later the saw's teeth snipped the last restraining bolt. He returned the tool to his harness, wiped the sweat from his hands, then nudged the door open.

Crokus poked his head into the room. In the grey dimness he saw a large four-poster bed a few feet to his left, its headboard against the outer wall. Mosquito netting descended around it, ending in piled heaps on the floor. From within came the even breaths of someone deep in sleep. The room

was redolent of expensive perfume, something spicy and probably from Callows.

Immediately across from him were two doors, one ajar and leading into a bathing chamber; the other a formidable barrier of banded oak sporting an enormous lock. Against the wall to his right stood a clothes cupboard and a makeup stand over which stood three polished silver mirrors hinged together. The centre one rose flush on the wall, the outer two angled on to the tabletop to provide an infinity of admiring visages.

Crokus turned sideways and edged into the room. He rose slowly and stretched, relieving his muscles of the tension that had held them for the past half-hour. He swung his gaze to the makeup stand, then tiptoed towards it.

The D'Arle estate was third from the summit of Old K'rul's Avenue, which climbed the first of the inner city's hills to a circular court tangled with weeds and irregular, half-buried dolmens. Opposite the court rose K'rul Temple, its ancient stones latticed with cracks and entombed in moss.

The last monk of the Eldering God had died generations past. The square belfry that rose from the temple's inner court bore architectural stylings of a people long dead. Four rose marble posts marked the corners of the high platform, still holding aloft a peaked roof with sides that were scaled in green-stained bronze tiles.

The belfry overlooked a dozen flat roofs, of houses that belonged to gentry. One such structure crowded close to one of the temple's rough-hewn walls, and across its roof lay the heavy shadow of the tower. On this roof crouched an assassin with blood on his hands.

Talo Krafar of Jurig Denatte's Clan drew breath in hissing gasps. Sweat trickled muddy streaks down his brow and droplets fell from his broad, crooked nose. His dark eyes were wide as he stared down at his hands, for the blood staining them was his own.

His mission this night had been as a Roamer, patrolling the city's rooftops which, except for the occasional thief, were the assassins' sole domain, the means by which they travelled the city for the most part undetected. The rooftops provided their routes on missions of unsanctioned political ... activities or the continuation of a feud between two Houses, or the punishment for betrayal. The Council ruled by day under public scrutiny; the Guild ruled by night, unseen, leaving no witnesses. It had always been this way, since Darujhistan first rose on the shores of Lake Azur.

Talo had been crossing an innocuous rooftop when a crossbow quarrel had driven a hammer blow to his left shoulder. He was flung forward by the concussion, and for an unknown length of time stared dumbfounded at the cloud-wreathed sky overhead, wondering what had happened. Finally, as numbness slowly gave way to agony, he twisted on to his side. The quarrel had gone entirely through him. It lay on the tarred tiles a few feet away. He rolled until he was beside the bloodied bolt.

One glance had been enough to confirm that this was no thief's quarrel. It had come from a heavy weapon – an assassin's weapon. As this fact worked its way through the confused jumble of Talo's thoughts, he drew himself up to his knees, and then to his feet. An unsteady jog brought him to the building's edge.

Blood streamed from the wound as he climbed down to the unlit alley below. His moccasins resting finally on the slick, rubbish-littered cobblestones, he paused, forcing clarity into his head. An assassin war had begun this night. But which Clan Leader was fool enough to believe he or she could usurp Vorcan's mastery of the Guild? In any case, he would return to his clan's nest, if possible. With this in mind, he began to run.

He had dashed into the shadows of his third alley when ice trickled down his spine. Breath catching, Talo froze. The sensation creeping over him was unmistakable, as certain as instinct: he was being stalked. He glanced down at the blood-soaked front of his shirt and realized that there was no hope of outrunning his hunter. No doubt his stalker had seen him enter the alley and even now had a crossbow trained on its mouth at the far end. At least, that is how Talo would play it.

He'd have to turn the game round, set a trap. And for that he'd need the rooftops. Talo turned back to the alley-mouth he had just entered and studied the nearby buildings. Two streets to his right squatted the K'rul Temple. His gaze fixed on the dark edifice that was the belfry. *There.*

The climb left him close to unconsciousness, and he now crouched in the belfry's shadow one building away from the temple. His exertions had pumped blood from his shoulder in horrifying volume. He'd seen blood before, of course, but never so much of his own at one time. He wondered for the first time seriously if he would die. A numbness spread in his arms and legs, and he knew if he remained where he was any longer he might never leave. With a soft grunt he pushed himself upright. The jump down to the temple roof was only a matter of a few yards, but the impact jarred him to his knees.

Gasping, Talo drove thoughts of failure from his mind. All that was left was to climb down the temple's inner wall to the court, then ascend the belfry's spiral staircase. Two tasks. Two simple tasks. And, once within the belfry's shadows, he could command every nearby rooftop. And the stalker would come to him. Talo paused to check his own crossbow, which was strapped to his back, and the three quarrels sheathed on his left thigh.

He glared into the darkness around him. 'Whoever you are, you bastard,' he whispered, 'I want you.'

He began to crawl across the temple roof.

The lock on the jewel box had proved simple to pick. Ten minutes after entering the room Crokus had swept it clean. A small fortune's worth of gold, gem- and pearl-studded jewellery now resided in a small leather bag tied to his belt.

He squatted by the dressing-table and held in his hands his final prize. This, *I'll keep.* The item was a sky-blue silk turban with gold-braided tassels, no doubt intended for the upcoming Fête. He ended his long minute of admiration, tucked the turban under an arm, then rose. His gaze lingered on the bed across from him, and he moved closer.

The netting obscured the form half buried beneath soft blankets. Another step brought him to the bedframe's edge. From the waist up the girl was naked. An embarrassed flush rose in the thief's cheeks, but he did not look away. *Queen of Dreams, but she's lovely!* At seventeen years of age, Crokus had seen enough whores and dancers not to tremble agape at a woman's exposed virtues; even still his gaze lingered. Then, grimacing, he headed back to the balcony door. A moment later he was outside. He drew a deep breath of the cool night air to clear his head. In the blanket of darkness overhead a handful of stars shone sufficiently bright to pierce the gauze of clouds. Not clouds, but smoke, drifting across the lake from the north. The word of Pale's fall to the Malazan Empire had been on the tongues of everyone for the past two days.

And *we're* next.

His uncle had told him that the Council still frantically proclaimed neutrality, desperate in their efforts to separate the city from the now destroyed Free Cities alliance. But the Malazans didn't seem to be listening. And *why should they?* Uncle Mammot had asked. *Darujhistan's army is a contemptible handful of noble sons who do nothing but strut back and forth on Whore Street, gripping their jewelled swords ...*

Crokus climbed to the estate's roof and padded silently across its tiles. Another house, of equal height, was before him, its flat top less than six feet away. The thief paused at the edge and looked down to the alley thirty feet below, seeing only a pool of darkness, then he jumped to land softly on the next roof.

He began to cross it. Off to his left rose the stark silhouette of K'rul's belfry tower, gnarled like a bony fist thrust into the night sky. Crokus brought one hand down to the leather bag tied to his belt, probing with his fingers the knot and the condition of the drawstrings. Satisfied that all was secure, he checked the turban tucked beneath a strap of his harness. All was well. He continued his soundless way across the rooftop. A fine night indeed. Crokus smiled to himself.

Talo Krafar opened his eyes. Dazed and uncomprehending, he stared about himself. Where was he? Why did he feel so weak? Then memory returned, and a groan slipped from his lips. He had blacked out, leaning here against this marble pillar. But what had awoken him? Stiffening, the assassin pushed himself up on the dusty column and scanned the rooftops below. There! A figure moved across the flat top of a building less that fifty feet away.

Now, you bastard. Now. He raised his crossbow, anchoring one elbow against the pillar. He had already cocked his weapon, though he had no memory of having done so. At this distance there was no chance of missing. In seconds his stalker would be dead. Talo bared his teeth and took careful aim.

Crokus was half-way across the rooftop, one hand tracing the silk finery of the turban snug over his heart, when a coin clattered loudly at his feet. Instinctively he pounced down and trapped it beneath both hands. Something hissed through the air immediately above his head, and he looked up, startled, then ducked again as a ceramic tile shattered twenty feet away.

He moaned with sudden realization. As he clambered to his feet one hand absently collected the coin and tucked it under his belt.

Talo cursed in disbelief. He lowered the crossbow and stared down at the figure, dumbfounded, until his instinct for danger asserted itself one last time. Whirling, he caught a blurred glimpse of a cloaked figure standing before him, arms raised. Then the arms flashed down and two long, grooved daggers slid into Talo's chest. With a final baffled grunt, the assassin died.

A grating sound reached Crokus's ears and he spun to face the belfry. A black shape tumbled from between the pillars and landed with a thump fifteen feet away. Moments later a crossbow clanged down beside it. Crokus

looked up to see a silhouette framed between the pillars, glittering long-bladed knives in its hands. The figure seemed to be studying him.

'Oh, Mowri,' the thief prayed, then turned and ran.

In the K'rul belfry the killer's oddly shaped eyes watched the thief scamper towards the rooftop's far side. With a slight lifting of its head the killer sniffed the air, then frowned. A burst of power had just frayed the fabric of night, like a finger poking through rotted cloth. And, through the rent, something had come.

The thief reached the far edge and disappeared over it. The killer hissed a spell in a language older than the belfry and the temple, a language that had not been heard in this land for millennia, then sprang from the tower. Enwreathed in magic, the killer's descent to the rooftop below was slow, controlled. The landing came as a light brush on the tiles.

A second figure appeared, its cloak spread like a black wing, from the above darkness to join the first. Then a third, also descending in silence, landed on the rooftop. They spoke briefly. The last to arrive muttered a command, then moved off. The remaining two exchanged a few last words, then set out on the thief's trail, the second one preparing its crossbow.

Ten minutes later Crokus leaned against the sloped roof of a merchant's house to regain his breath. He'd seen no one, heard nothing. Either the killer hadn't pursued or he had managed to lose him. Or her. In his mind returned his single vision of the figure as it stood in the belfry. No, unlikely that it could be a woman – too tall, perhaps six and a half feet, and thin.

A tremor ran through the young thief. What had he stumbled on? An assassin had almost skewered him, and then had himself been murdered. A Guild war? If so, it made the rooftops a risky place to be.

Warily, Crokus rose and looked about him.

A tile further along the roof clattered down the sloped side. Crokus whirled to see the killer dashing towards him. One look at the two daggers flashing in the air and the thief darted to the roof's edge and leaped out into darkness.

The building across from him was too distant, but Crokus had chosen his resting place on familiar territory. As he fell into the shadows he reached out grasping hands. The guidewire caught his arms near the elbows and he scrambled frantically for a secure grip, then hung dangling twenty feet above the alley.

While most of the clothes-lines spanning the city's streets were just thin, unreliable hemp, among them were wrapped wires. Placed by thieves generations past they were securely bolted to the walls. By day Monkey Road, as the thieves called it, looked no different from any other line, festooned with undergarments and sheets. With the sun's setting, however, came its true purpose.

With hands burned raw Crokus made his way along the wire towards the far wall. He chanced to glance up then, and froze. On the roof's edge before him stood a second hunter, taking careful aim with a heavy, antique crossbow.

Crokus let go of the wire. A quarrel whizzed directly above his head as he fell. From behind and below a window shattered. His drop was cut short by the first of a series of clothes-lines, tugging his limbs and twitching him about before snapping. After what seemed an eternity of bone-wrenching jerks and the whip of cord slicing through his clothes and flaying his skin, Crokus struck the alley's cobblestones, straight-legged and leaning far forward. His knees buckled. He dipped a shoulder enough to earn a slightly cushioned roll, brought up short when his head struck a wall.

Dazed and groaning, Crokus pushed himself upright. He looked up. Through vision blurred with pain he saw a figure descending in seeming slow-motion immediately overhead. The thief's eyes widened. *Sorcery!*

He turned and staggered dizzily before managing a limping run down the alleyway. He reached the corner and, briefly lit by gaslight, hurried across a

wide street then entered the mouth of another alley. Once in its shadow, Crokus stopped. Cautiously, he poked his head out from the wall's edge for a look. A quarrel struck the brick beside his face. He jumped back into the alley, spun and sprinted.

Above him Crokus heard the flapping of a cloak. A burning spasm in his left hip made him stumble. Another quarrel whipped past his shoulder and skidded on the cobblestones. The spasm passed as quickly as it had come and he staggered on. Ahead, at the alley-mouth, was the lit doorway of a tenement. An old woman sat on the stone steps puffing on a pipe. Her eyes glittered as she watched the thief approach. As Crokus bounded past her and up the steps she rapped the pipe against the sole of her shoe. Sparks rained on to the cobbles.

Crokus pushed open the door and plunged inside. He paused. A narrow, poorly lit hallway was before him, a staircase crowded with children at the far end. His eyes on the stairs, he jogged up the hall. From the curtained doorways on either side came a cacophony of noise: voices raised in argument, wailing babies, the clatter of cookware.

'Don't you people ever sleep?' Crokus shouted as he ran. The children on the stairs scampered out of his way and he took the warped steps two at a time. On the top floor he stopped at a door a third of the way down the hall, this one solid oak. He pushed it open and entered the room within.

An old man sitting behind a massive desk looked up briefly from his work, then resumed his frantic scrawl on a sheet of crinkled parchment. 'Evening, Crokus,' he said distractedly.

'And to you, Uncle,' Crokus gasped.

On Uncle Mammot's shoulder squatted a small winged monkey, whose glittering, half-mad gaze followed the young thief's dart across the room to the window opposite the door. Flinging open the shutters Crokus climbed up on to the sill. Below was a squalid, overgrown garden mostly lost in shadows. A lone, gnarled tree rose upward. He eyed the branches across from him, then gripped the window-frame and leaned back. He drew a deep breath, then propelled himself forward.

As he passed through the intervening gap he heard a surprised grunt come from directly above, then a wild scratching against stone. An instant later someone crashed down into the garden below. Cats shrieked and a voice groaned out a single pained curse.

Crokus clung to a bowing branch. He timed each bounce of the resilient wood then extended his legs as the branch pulled him up. His moccasins landed on a window-sill and held. Grunting, he swung himself on to it and let go of the branch. He punched at the wooden shutters. They sprang inward and Crokus followed head first, down on to the floor and rolling to his feet.

He heard movement from another room in the apartment. Scrambling to his feet, he bolted for the hallway door, flung it open and slipped out just as a hoarse voice shouted a curse behind him. Crokus ran to the far end of the passage, where a ladder led to a hatch on the ceiling.

Soon he was on the roof. He crouched in the darkness and tried to catch his breath. The burning sensation returned to his hip. He must have damaged something in his fall from the guidewire. He reached down to massage the spot and found his fingers pressing something hard, round and hot. *The coin!* Crokus reached for it.

Just then he heard a sudden whistling sound, and chips of stone spattered him. Ducking, he saw a quarrel, its shaft split by the impact, bounce once on the rooftop then plummet over the edge, spinning wildly. A soft moan escaped his lips and he scrambled across the roof to the far side. Without pause he jumped. Ten feet down was an awning, sagged and stretched out of shape, on which he landed. The iron spars framing the canvas dipped but held. From there it was a quick climb down to the street.

Crokus jogged to the corner, where an old building squatted with yellow light bleeding through dirty windows. A wooden sign hung above the door, bearing the faded image of a bird dead on its back, feet jutting upward. The thief bounded up the steps and pushed open the door.

A rush of light and noise washed over him like balm. He slammed the door behind him and leaned against it. He closed his eyes, pulling the

disguising cloth from his face and head, revealing shoulder-length black hair – now dripping with sweat – and regular features surrounding light blue eyes.

As he reached up to wipe his brow a mug was pushed into his hand. Crokus opened his eyes to see Sulty hurry by, carrying on one hand a tray loaded with pewter tankards. She glanced at him over her shoulder and grinned. 'Rough night, Crokus?'

He stared at her, then said, 'No, nothing special.' He raised the mug to his lips and drank deep.

Across the street from the ramshackle Phoenix Inn, a hunter stood at the roof's edge and studied the door through which the thief had just passed. The crossbow lay cradled in its arms.

The second hunter arrived, sheathing two long-knives as it came alongside the first.

'What happened to you?' the first hunter asked quietly, in its native tongue.

'Had an argument with a cat.'

The two were silent for a moment, then the first hunter sighed worriedly. 'All in all, too awry to be natural.'

The other agreed. 'You felt the parting too, then.'

'An Ascendant ... meddled. Too cautious to show itself fully, however.'

'Unfortunate. It's been years since I last killed an Ascendant.'

They began to check their weapons. The first hunter loaded the crossbow and slipped four extra quarrels in its belt. The second hunter removed each long-knife and cleaned it carefully of sweat and grime.

They heard someone approach from behind, and turned to see their commander.

'He's in the inn,' the second hunter said.

'We'll leave no witnesses to this secret war with the Guild,' the first added.

The commander glanced at the door of the Phoenix Inn. Then, to the hunters, she said, 'No. The wagging tongue of a witness might be useful to our efforts.'

'The runt had help,' the first hunter said meaningfully.

The commander shook her head. 'We return to the fold.'

'Very well.'

The two hunters put away their weapons. The first glanced back at the inn and asked, 'Who protected him, do you think?'

The second hunter snarled. 'Someone with a sense of humour.'

CHAPTER SIX

There is a cabal breathing
deeper than the bellows
drawing up the emerald fires
beneath rain-glistened cobbles,
while you may hear the groaning
from the caverns below,
the whisper of sorcery
is less than the dying sigh
of a thief stumbling unwilling
into Darujhistan's secret web ...

Cabal (fragment)
Puddle (b. 1122?)

The splayed tip of her right wing brushed the scarred black rock as Crone climbed the whistling updraughts of Moon's Spawn. From the pocked caves and starlit ledges her restless brothers and sisters called out to her as she passed. 'Do *we fly?'* they asked. But Crone made no reply. Her glittering black eyes were fixed on heaven's vault. Her enormous wings beat a thundering refrain of taut, unrelenting power. She had no time for the nervous cackling of the younglings; no time for answering their simplistic needs with the wisdom her thousand years of life had earned her.

This night, Crone flew for her lord.

As she rose above the shattered peaks of the Moon's crest a high wind swept her wings, rasping dry and cold along her oily feathers. Around her, thin wisps of shredded smoke rode the currents of night air like lost spirits. Crone circled once, her sharp gaze catching the glimmer of the few remaining fires among the crags below, then she dipped a wing and sailed out on the wind's tide as it rolled northward to Lake Azur.

The featureless expanse of the Dwelling Plain was beneath her, the grass sweeping in grey waves unbroken by house or hill. Directly ahead lay the glittering jewelled cloak that was Darujhistan, casting into the sky a sapphire glow. As she neared the city her unnaturally acute vision detected, here and there among the estates crowding the upper tier, the aquamarine emanation of sorcery.

Crone cackled aloud. Magic was ambrosia to Great Ravens. They were drawn to it by the scent of blood and power, and within its aura their lifespans lengthened into centuries. Its musk had other effects as well. Crone cackled again. Her gaze fixed on one particular estate, around which glowed a profusion of protective sorcery. Her lord had imparted to her a thorough description of the magical signature she must find, and now she had found it. Crooking her wings, she sank gracefully towards the estate.

Inland from Gadrobi District's harbour the land rose in four tiers climbing eastward. Ramped cobblestone streets, worn to a polished mosaic, marked Gadrobi District's Trade Streets, five in all, which were the only routes through Marsh District and into the next tier, Lakefront District. Beyond Lakefront's crooked aisles twelve wooden gates opened on to Daru District, and from Daru another twelve gates – these ones manned by the City Watch and barred by iron portcullis – connected the lower and upper cities.

On the fourth and highest tier brooded the estates of Darujhistan's nobility as well as its publicly known sorcerers. At the intersection of Old King's Walk and View Street rose a flat-topped hill on which sat Majesty Hall, where each day the Council gathered. A narrow park encircled the hill, with sand-strewn pathways winding among centuries-old acacias. At the park's entrance, near High Gallows Hill, stood a massive rough-hewn stone gate, the last-surviving remnant of the castle that once commanded Majesty Hill.

The days of kings had long since ended in Darujhistan. The gate, known as Despot's Barbican, stood stark and unadorned, its lattice of cracks a fading script of past tyranny.

In the shadow of the Barbican's single massive lintel stone stood two men. One, his shoulder against the pitted rock, wore a ringed hauberk and a boiled leather cap bearing the City Watch insignia. Scabbarded to his belt was a plain shortsword, its grip of wrapped leather worn smooth. A pike leaned against one shoulder. He was nearing the end of his midnight guard duty and patiently awaited the arrival of the man who would officially relieve him. The guard's eyes flicked on occasion to the second man, with whom he had shared this place many another night over the past year. The glances he cast at the well-dressed gentleman were surreptitious, empty of expression.

As with every other time Councilman Turban Orr came to the gate at this dead hour of night, the nobleman had scarcely deemed the guard worthy of notice; nor had he ever given an indication that he recognized the guard as being the same man each time.

Turban Orr seemed a man short on patience, forever pacing and fretting, pausing every now and then to adjust his jewelled burgundy cloak. The councilman's polished boots clicked as he paced, throwing a soft echo under the Barbican. From the shadow the guard's gaze caught Orr's gloved hand where it rested on the silver pommel of a duelling sword, noting the index finger tapping in time with the boot clicks.

At the early part of his watch, long before the arrival of the councilman, the guard would walk slowly around the Barbican, reaching out on occasion to touch the ancient, grim stonework. Six years' worth of night watch at this gate had bred a close relationship between the man and the rough-cut basalt: he knew every crack, every chisel scar; he knew where the fittings had weakened, where time and the elements had squeezed mortar from between the stones then gnawed it to dust. And he also knew that its apparent weaknesses were but a deception. The Barbican, and all it stood for, patiently waited still, a spectre of the past, hungry to be born yet again.

And that, the guard had long ago vowed, he would never let it do – if such things were within his power. Despot's Barbican provided the man with every reason he needed to be what he was: Circle Breaker, a spy.

Both he and the councilman awaited the arrival of the other; the one who never failed to appear. Turban Orr would growl his usual complaint, disgusted with tardiness; then he would grasp the other's arm and they would walk side by side beneath the Barbican's brooding lintel stone. And, with eyes long accustomed to darkness, the guard would mark the other's face, burning it indelibly in the superb memory hidden behind expressionless, unmemorable features.

By the time the two Council members returned from their walk, the guard would have been relieved and well on his way to delivering a message according to his master's instructions. If Circle Breaker's luck held, he might survive the civil war into which Darujhistan, he felt, was about to plunge – and never mind the Malazan nemesis. One nightmare at a time, he often told himself, particularly on nights like these, when Despot's Barbican seemed to breathe its promise of resurrection with mocking certainty.

'As this may be in your interest,' High Alchemist Baruk read aloud from the parchment note in his plump hands. Always the same opening line, hinting of disquieting knowledge. An hour earlier his servant Roald had delivered the note, which, like all the others that had come to him over the past year, had been found tucked into one of the ornamental murder holes in the estate's rear postern gate.

Recognizing the pattern, Baruk had immediately read the missive then dispatched his messengers out into the city. Such news demanded action, and he was one of the few secret powers within Darujhistan capable of dealing with it.

Now he sat in a plush chair in his study, musing. His deceptively sleepy gaze flicked down again to the words on the parchment. 'Councilman Turban Orr walks in the garden with Councilman Feder. I remain known only as Circle Breaker, a servant of the Eel, whose interests continue to coincide with your own.' Once again Baruk felt temptation. With his talents it would be a small thing to discover the writer's identity – though not the Eel's, of course: that was an identity sought by many, all to no avail – but, as always, something held him back.

He shifted his bulk on the chair and sighed. 'Very well, Circle Breaker, I'll continue to honour you, though clearly you know more of me than I of you, and fortunate it is indeed that your master's interests coincide with my own. Still.' He frowned, thinking about the Eel, about the man's – or woman's – undisclosed interests. He knew enough to recognize that too many forces had come into play – a gathering of Ascendant powers was a fell thing. To continue to step unseen in defence of the city was becoming increasingly difficult. So, the question came yet again: Was this Eel using him as well?

Oddly enough, he did not feel too concerned about this possibility. So much vital information had been passed into his hands already.

He folded the parchment carefully and muttered a simple cantrip. The note vanished with a small plop of displaced air, joining the others in a safe place.

Baruk closed his eyes. Behind him the broad window shutters rattled in a gust of wind, then settled again. A moment later there came a sharp rap against the smoky glass. Baruk sat upright, his eyes startled open. A second rap, louder than the first, brought him round with a swift alacrity surprising for one of his girth. On his feet, he faced the window. Something crouched on the ledge, visible through the shutters only as a bulky black shape.

Baruk frowned. *Impossible.* Nothing could penetrate his magic barriers undetected. The alchemist gestured with one hand, and the shutters sprang open. Behind the glass waited a Great Raven. Its head snapped to view Baruk with one eye, then the other. It pushed boldly against the thin glass with its massive, ridged chest. The pane bulged, then shattered.

His Warren fully open, Baruk raised both hands, a savage spell on his lips.

'Don't waste your breath!' the Raven rasped, swelling its chest and ruffling its mangy feathers to rid itself of glass shards. It cocked its head. 'You've called your guards,' it observed. 'No need, Wizard.' A single hop brought the enormous bird on to the floor. 'I bring words you will value. Have you anything to eat?'

Baruk studied the creature. 'I'm not in the habit of inviting Great Ravens into my home,' he said. 'You are no disguised demon, either.'

'Of course not. I'm named Crone.' Her head bobbed mockingly. 'At your pleasure, Lord.'

Baruk hesitated, considering. After a moment he sighed and said, 'Very well. I've returned my guards to their posts. My servant Roald comes with the leavings of supper, if that's agreeable to you.'

'Excellent!' Crone waddled across the floor to settle on the rug before the fireplace. 'There, Lord. Now, a calming crystal of wine, don't you think?'

'Who has sent you, Crone?' Baruk asked, walking over to the decanter on his desk. Normally he did not drink after sunset, for night was when he worked, but he had to acknowledge Crone's perceptiveness. A calming balm was exactly what he needed.

The Great Raven hesitated slightly before answering, 'The Lord of Moon's Spawn.'

Baruk paused in the filling of his glass. 'I see,' he said quietly, struggling to control his surging heart. He set the decanter down slowly and, with great concentration, raised the goblet to his lips. The liquid was cool on his tongue, and its passage down his throat indeed calmed him. 'Well, then,' he said, turning, 'what would your lord have of a peaceful alchemist?'

Crone's chipped beak opened in what Baruk realized was silent laughter. The bird fixed a single glittering eye on him. 'Your answer rode the very breath of your words, Lord. Peace. My lord wishes to speak with you. He wishes to come here, this very night. Within the hour.'

'And you're to await my answer.'

'Only if you decide quickly, Lord. I have things to do, after all. I'm more than a simple message-bearer. Those who know wisdom when they hear it hold me dear. I am Crone, eldest of the Moon's Great Ravens, whose eyes have looked upon a thousand years of human folly. Hence my tattered coat and broken beak as evidence of your indiscriminate destruction. I am but a winged witness to your eternal madness.'

In quiet mockery Baruk said, 'More than just a witness. It's well known how you and your kind feasted on the plain outside Pale's walls.'

'Yet we were not the first to feast on flesh and blood, Lord, lest you forget.'

Baruk turned away. 'Far be it for me to defend my species,' he muttered, more to himself than to Crone, whose words had stung him. His eyes fell on the shards of glass littering the floor. He voiced a mending spell and watched as they reassembled. 'I will speak with your lord, Crone.' He nodded as the glass pane rose from the floor and returned to the window-frame. 'Tell me, will he as easily disdain my wards as you did?'

'My lord is possessed of honour and courtesy,' Crone replied ambiguously. 'I shall call him, then?'

'Do so,' Baruk said, sipping his wine. 'An avenue will be provided for his passage.'

There came a knock at the door.

'Yes?'

Roald stepped inside. 'Someone is at the gate wishing to speak with you,' the white-haired servant said, setting down a plate heaped with roast pork.

Baruk glanced at Crone and raised an eyebrow.

The bird ruffled her feathers. 'Your guest is mundane, a restless personage whose thoughts are thick with greed and treachery. A demon crouches on his shoulder, named Ambition.'

'His name, Roald?' Baruk asked.

The servant hesitated, his soft eyes flicked uneasily at the bird now ambling towards the food.

Baruk laughed. 'My wise guest's counsel indicates she well knows the man's name. Speak on, Roald.'

'Councilman Turban Orr.'

'I would remain for this,' Crone said. 'If you would seek my counsel.'

'Please do, and, yes, I would,' the alchemist replied.

'I am no more than a pet dog,' the Great Raven crooned slyly, anticipating his next question. 'To the councilman's eyes, that is. My words a beast's whimper to his ears.' She speared a piece of meat and swallowed it quickly.

Baruk found himself beginning to like this mangy old witch of a bird. 'Bring the councilman to us, Roald.'

The servant departed.

Archaic torches lit an estate's high-walled garden with a flickering light that threw wavering shadows across the pavestones. As a nightwind swept in from the lake, rustling leaves, the shadows danced like imps. On the second floor of the building was a balcony overlooking the garden. Behind the curtained window, two figures moved.

Rallick Nom lay prone on the garden wall in a niche of darkness beneath the estate's gabled cornice. He studied the feminine silhouette with the patience of a snake. It was the fifth night in a row that he had occupied his hidden vantage-point. The Lady Simtal's lovers numbered as many, but he had identified two in particular worthy of attention. Both were city councilmen.

The glass door opened and a figure walked out on to the balcony. Rallick smiled as he recognized Councilman Lim. The assassin shifted position slightly, slipping one gloved hand under the stock of his crossbow, reaching up with the other to swing back the oiled crank. His eyes on the man leaning against the balcony railing across from him, Rallick carefully inserted a quarrel. A glance down at the bolt's iron head reassured him. The poison glittered wetly along the razor-sharp edges. Returning his attention to the balcony he saw that Lady Simtal had joined Lim.

No wonder there's no shortage of lovers for that one, Rallick thought, his eyes narrowing in study. Her black hair, now unpinned, flowed down sleek and shiny to the small of her back. She wore a gauze-thin nightdress and, with the lamps of the room behind her, her body's round curves were clearly visible.

As they spoke their voices carried to where Rallick lay hidden.

'Why the alchemist?' Lady Simtal was asking, evidently resuming a conversation begun inside. 'A fat old man smelling of sulphur and brimstone. Hardly suggestive of political power. Not even a council member, is he?'

Lim laughed softly. 'Your naivety is a charm, Lady, a charm.'

Simtal pulled back from the railing and crossed her arms. 'Educate me, then.' Her words came sharp, tightly bridled.

Lim shrugged. 'We have naught but suspicions, Lady. But it is the wise wolf that follows every spoor, no matter how slight. The alchemist would have people think as you do. A doddering old fool.' Lim paused, as if in thought, perhaps weighing how much he should reveal. 'We have sources,' he continued cautiously, 'among the magery. They inform us of one certain fact heavy with implications. A good many of the wizards in the city fear the alchemist, and they name him by a title – that alone suggests a secret cabal of some sort. A gathering of sorcerers, Lady, is a fell thing.'

Lady Simtal had returned to the councilman's side. Both now leaned on the railing studying the dark garden below. The woman was silent for a time, then she said, 'He has Council ties?'

'If he has, the evidence is buried deep.' Lim flashed a grin. 'And if he hasn't, then that might change – this very night.'

Politics, Rallick snarled silently. And power. *The bitch spreads her legs to the Council, offering a vice few can ignore.* Rallick's hands twitched. He would kill this night. Not a contract: the Guild had no part in this. The vendetta was personal. She was gathering power around her, insulating herself, and Rallick thought he understood why. The ghosts of betrayal would not leave her alone.

Patience, he reminded himself, as he took aim. For the last two years the life of Lady Simtal had been one of indolence, the riches she had stolen had served to whet her every greed, and the prestige as sole owner of the estate had done much to grease the hinges of her bedroom door. The crime she'd

committed had not been against Rallick but, unlike her victim, Rallick had no pride to halt vengeance.

Patience, Rallick repeated, his lips moving to the word as he sighted down the crossbow's length. A quality defined by its reward, and that reward was but moments away.

'A fine-looking hound,' Councilman Turban Orr said, as he handed Roald his cloak.

In the room Baruk was the only one capable of discerning the aura of illusion surrounding the black hunting dog lying curled on the rug before the fireplace. The alchemist smiled and gestured to a chair. 'Please be seated, Councilman.'

'I apologize for disturbing you so late at night,' Orr said, as he lowered himself into the plush chair. Baruk sat down opposite him, Crone between them. 'It's said,' Orr continued, 'that alchemy flowers best in deep darkness.'

'Hence you gambled on my being awake,' Baruk said. 'A well-placed wager, Councilman. Now, what would you have of me?'

Orr reached down to pat Crone's head.

Baruk looked away to keep himself from laughing.

'The Council votes in two days,' Orr said. 'With a proclamation of neutrality such as we seek, war with the Malazan Empire will be averted – so we believe, but there are those in the Council who do not. Pride has made them belligerent, unreasonable.'

'As it does us all,' murmured Baruk.

Orr leaned forward. 'The support of Darujhistan's sorcerers would do much to favour our cause,' he said.

'Careful,' Crone rumbled. 'This man now hunts in earnest.'

Orr glanced down at the dog.

'A bad leg,' Baruk said. 'Pay it no mind.' The alchemist leaned back in his chair and plucked at a loose thread on his robe. 'I admit to some confusion, Councilman. You appear to be assuming some things I cannot countenance.' Baruk spread his hands and met Orr's eyes. 'Darujhistan's sorcerers, for one. You could travel the Ten Worlds and not find a more spiteful, rabid collection of humanity. Oh, I don't suggest that they are all like this – there are those whose only interest, indeed, obsession, lies in the pursuit of their craft. Their noses have been buried in books so long they could not even tell you what century this is. The others find bickering their only true pleasure in life.'

A smile had come to Orr's thin lips as Baruk spoke. 'But,' he said with a cunning gleam in his dark eyes, 'there is one thing they all acknowledge.'

'Oh? What is that, Councilman?'

'Power. We're all aware of your eminence among the city's mages, Baruk. Your word alone would bring others.'

'I'm flattered that you would think so,' Baruk replied. 'Unfortunately, therein lies your second erroneous assumption. Even if I had such influence as you suggest,' Crone snorted and Baruk flicked a savage glare at her, then continued, 'which I do not, for what possible reason would I support such a wilfully ignorant position as yours? A proclamation of neutrality? Might as well whistle against the wind, Councilman. What purpose would it serve?'

Orr's smile had tightened. 'Surely, Lord,' he purred, 'you have no wish to share the same fate as the wizards of Pale?'

Baruk frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'Assassinated by an Empire Claw. Moon's Spawn was entirely on its own against the Empire.'

'Your information contradicts mine,' Baruk said stiffly, then cursed himself.

'Lean not too heavily on this one,' Crone said smugly. 'You are both wrong.'

Orr's eyebrows had risen at Baruk's words. 'Indeed? Perhaps it might profit us both to share our information?'

'Unlikely,' Baruk said. 'Throwing the threat of the Empire at me implies what? That if the proclamation is voted down, the city's sorcerers will all die at the Empire's hand. But if it wins, you're free to justify opening the gates to the Malazans in peaceful co-existence, and in such a scenario the city's magery lives on.'

'Astute, Lord,' Crone said.

Baruk studied the anger now visible beneath Orr's expression. 'Neutrality? How you've managed to twist that word. Your proclamation serves the first step towards total annexation, Councilman. Fortunate for you that I cast no weight, no vote, no influence.' Baruk rose. 'Roald will see you out.'

Turban Orr also rose. 'You've made a grave error,' he said. 'The proclamation's wording is not yet complete. It seems we would do well to remove any consideration regarding Darujhistan's magery.'

'Too bold,' Crone observed. 'Prod him and see what more comes forth.'

Baruk strode towards the window. 'One may only hope,' he said drily over a shoulder, 'that your vote fails to win the day.'

Orr's reply was hot and rushed. 'By my count we've reached a majority this very night, Alchemist. You could have provided the honey on the cream. Alas,' he sneered,-we'll win by only one vote. But that will suffice.'

Baruk turned to face Orr as Roald quietly entered the room, bearing the councilman's cloak.

Crone stretched out on the rug. 'On this night of all nights,' she said, in mock dismay, 'to tempt myriad fates with such words.' The Great Raven cocked her head. Faintly, as from a great distance, she thought she could hear the spinning of a coin.

There was a tremble of power, coming from somewhere within the city, and Crone shivered.

Rallick Nom waited. No more indolence for the Lady Simtal. The end of such luxuries came this night. The two figures moved away from the railing and faced the glass door. Rallick's finger tightened on the trigger.

He froze. A whirring, spinning sound filled his head, whispering words that left him bathed in sudden sweat. All at once everything shifted, turned over in his mind. His plan for quick vengeance tumbled into disarray, and from the ruins arose something far more ... elaborate.

All this had come between breaths. Rallick's gaze cleared. Lady Simtal and Councilman Lim stood at the door. The woman reached out to slide the panel to one side. Rallick swerved his crossbow an inch to the left, then squeezed the trigger. The blackened iron rib of the bow bucked with the release of tension. The quarrel sped outward, so fast as to be invisible until it hit home.

A figure on the balcony spun with the quarrel's impact, arms thrown out as it stumbled. The glass door shattered as the figure fell through it.

Lady Simtal screamed in horror.

Rallick waited no longer. Rolling on to his back he reached up and slid the crossbow into the narrow ledge between the cornice and the roof. Then he slipped down the outside of the wall, hung with his hands briefly as shouts of alarm filled the estate. A moment later he dropped, spinning as he fell, and landed cat-like in the alley.

The assassin straightened, adjusted his cloak, then calmly walked into the side-street, away from the estate. No more indolence for the Lady Simtal. But no quick demise, either. A very powerful, very well-respected member of the City Council had just been assassinated on her balcony. Lim's wife – now widow – would certainly have something to say about this. The first phase, Rallick told himself as he strode through Osserc's Gate and descended the wide ramp leading down into the Daru District, just the first phase, an opening gambit, a hint to Lady Simtal that a hunt has begun, with the eminent mistress herself as the quarry. It *won't be easy: the woman's no slouch in the intrigue game.*

'There'll be more blood,' he whispered aloud, as he turned a corner and approached the poorly lit entrance to the Phoenix Inn. 'But in the end she'll fall, and with that fall an old friend will rise.' As he neared the inn a figure stepped from the shadows of an adjacent alleyway. Rallick stopped. The figure gestured, then stepped back into the darkness.

Rallick followed. In the alley he waited for his eyes to adjust.

The man in front of him sighed. 'Your vendetta probably saved your life tonight,' he said, his tone bitter.

Rallick leaned against a wall and crossed his arms. 'Oh?'

Clan Leader Ocelot stepped close, his narrow, pitted face twisted into its habitual scowl. 'The night's been a shambles, Nom. You've heard nothing?'

'No.'

Ocelot's thin lips curled into a humourless smile. 'A war has begun on the rooftops. Someone is killing us. We lost five Roamers in less than an hour, meaning there's more than one killer out there.'

'Undoubtedly,' Rallick replied, fidgeting as the damp stones of the inn's wall reached through his cloak and touched his flesh with chill. As always, Guild affairs bored him.

Ocelot continued, 'We lost that bull of a man, Talo Krafar, and a Clan Leader.' The man snapped a glance over his shoulder as if expecting a sudden dagger to come flashing at his own back.

Despite his lack of interest Rallick's eyebrows lifted at this last bit of news. 'They must be good.'

'Good? All of our eye-witnesses are dead, goes the sour joke this night. They don't make mistakes, the bastards.'

'Everyone makes mistakes,' Rallick muttered. 'Has Vorcan gone out?'

Ocelot shook his head. 'Not yet. She's too busy recalling all the Clans.'

Rallick frowned, curious in spite of himself. 'Could this be a challenge to her Guild mastery? Perhaps an inside thing, a faction—'

'You think we're all fools, don't you, Nom? That was Vorcan's first suspicion. No, it's not internal. Whoever's killing our people is from outside the Guild, outside the city.'

To Rallick the answer seemed obvious suddenly, and he shrugged. 'An Empire Claw, then.'

Though his expression bore reluctance, Ocelot nevertheless acknowledged agreement. 'Likely,' he grated. 'They're supposed to be the best, aren't they? But why go after the Guild? You'd think they'd be taking out the nobles.'

'Are you asking me to guess the Empire's intentions, Ocelot?'

The Clan Leader blinked, then his scowl deepened. 'I came to warn you. And that's a favour, Nom. With you wrapped up in this vendetta thing, the Guild's not obliged to spread its wing over you. A favour.'

Rallick pushed himself from the wall and turned to the alley-mouth. 'A favour, Ocelot?' He laughed softly.

'We're setting a trap,' Ocelot said, moving to block Rallick's way. He jerked his scarred chin at the Phoenix Inn. 'Make yourself visible, and leave no doubt as to what you do for a living.'

Rallick's gaze on Ocelot held steady, impassive. 'Bait.'

'Just do it.'

Without replying, Rallick left the alley, climbed the steps and entered the Phoenix Inn.

'There is a shaping in the night,' Crone said, after Turban On-had left. The air around her shimmered as she assumed her true shape.

Baruk strode to his map table, hands clasped behind his back to still the trembling that had seized them. 'You felt it too, then.' He paused, then sighed. 'All in all, these seem the busiest hours.'

'A convergence of power ever yields thus,' Crone said, as she rose to stretch her wings. 'The black winds gather, Alchemist. Beware their flaying breath.'

Baruk grunted. 'While you ride them, a harbinger of our tragic ills.'

Crone laughed. She waddled to the window. 'My master comes. I've other tasks before me.'

Baruk turned. 'Permit me,' he said, gesturing. The window swung clear.

Crone flapped up on to the sill. She swivelled her head round and cocked an eye at Baruk. 'I see twelve ships riding a deep harbour,' she said. 'Eleven stand tall in flames.'

Baruk stiffened. He had not anticipated a prophecy. Now he was afraid. 'And the twelfth?' he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

'On the wind a hailstorm of sparks fill the night sky. I see them spinning, spinning about the last vessel.' Crone paused. 'Still spinning.' Then she was gone.

Baruk's shoulders slumped. He turned back to the map on the table and studied the eleven once Free Cities that now bore the Empire flag. Only Darujhistan remained, the twelfth and last marked by a flag that was not burgundy and grey. 'The passing of freedom,' he murmured.

Suddenly the walls around him groaned, and Baruk gasped as an enormous weight seemed to press down on him. The blood pounded in his head, lancing him with pain. He gripped the edge of the map table to steady himself. The incandescent globes of light suspended from the ceiling dimmed, then flickered out. In the darkness the alchemist heard cracks sweeping down the walls, as if a giant's hand had descended on the building. All at once the pressure vanished. Baruk raised a shaking hand to his sweat-slicked brow.

A soft voice spoke behind him. 'Greetings, High Alchemist. I am the Lord of Moon's Spawn.'

Still facing the table, Baruk closed his eyes and nodded. 'The title isn't necessary,' he whispered. 'Please call me Baruk.'

'I'm at home in darkness,' the Lord said. 'Will this prove an inconvenience, Baruk?'

The alchemist muttered a spell. Before him the details of the map on the table took on distinction, emanating a cool blue glow. He faced the Lord and was startled to discover that the tall, cloaked figure reflected as little heat as the room's inanimate objects. Nevertheless, he was able to distinguish quite clearly the man's features. 'You're Tiste Andii,' he said.

The Lord bowed slightly. His angled, multihued eyes scanned the room. 'Have you any wine, Baruk?'

'Of course, Lord.' The alchemist walked over to his desk.

'My name, as best as it can be pronounced by humans, is Anomander Rake.' The Lord followed Baruk to the desk, his boots clicking on the polished marble floor.

Baruk poured wine, then turned to study Rake with some curiosity. He had heard that Tiste Andii warriors were fighting the Empire up north, commanded by a savage beast of a man named Caladan Brood. They had allied with the Crimson Guard and, together, the two forces were decimating the Malazans. So, there were Tiste Andii in Moon's Spawn, and the man standing before him was their lord.

This moment marked the first time Baruk had ever seen a Tiste Andii face to face. He was more than a little disturbed. Such remarkable eyes, he thought. One moment a deep hue of amber, cat-like and unnerving, the next grey and banded like a snake's – a fell rainbow of colours to match any mood. He wondered if they were capable of lying.

In the alchemist's library lay copies of the surviving tomes of *Gothos' Folly*, Jaghut writings from millennia past. In them Tiste Andii were mentioned here and there in an aura of fear, Baruk recalled. Gothos himself, a Jaghut wizard who had descended the deepest warrens of Elder Magic, had praised the gods of the time that the Tiste Andii were so few in number.

And if anything, the mysterious black-skinned race had dwindled since then.

Anomander Rake's skin was jet-black, befitting Gothos' descriptions, but his mane flowed silver. He stood close to seven feet tall. His features were sharp, as if cut from onyx, a slight upward tilt to the large vertical-pupilled eyes.

A two-handed sword was strapped to Rake's broad back, its silver dragonskull pommel and archaic crosshilt jutting from a wooden scabbard fully six and a half feet long. From the weapon bled power, staining the air like black ink in a pool of water. As his gaze rested on it Baruk almost reeled, seeing, for a brief moment, a vast darkness yawning before him, cold as the heart of a glacier, from which came the stench of antiquity and a faint groaning sound. Baruk wrenched his eyes from the weapon, looked up to find Rake studying him from over one shoulder.

The Tiste Andii quirked a knowing smile, then handed Baruk one of the wine-filled goblets. 'Was Crone her usual melodramatic self?'

Baruk blinked, then could not help but grin.

Rake sipped his wine. 'She's never been modest in displaying her talents. Shall we sit?'

'Of course,' Baruk replied, relaxing in spite of his trepidation. From his years of study the alchemist knew that great power shaped different souls differently. Had Rake's been twisted Baruk would have known immediately. But the Lord's control seemed absolute. That alone engendered awe. The man shaped his power, not the other way around. Such control was, well, *inhuman.* He suspected that this would not be the first insight he'd have regarding this warrior-mage that would leave him astonished and frightened.

'She threw everything she had at me,' Rake said suddenly. The Tiste Andii's eyes shone green as glacial ice.

Startled by the vehemence of that outburst, Baruk frowned. *She? Oh, the Empress, of course.*

'And even then,' Rake continued, 'she couldn't bring me down.'

The alchemist stiffened in his chair. 'Yet,' he said cautiously, 'you were driven back, battered and beaten. I can feel your power, Anomander Rake,' he added, grimacing. 'It pulses from you like waves. So I must ask: how is it you were defeated? I know something of the Empire's High Mage Tayschrenn. He has power but it's no match to yours. So again I ask, how?'

His gaze on the map table, Rake replied, 'I've committed my sorcerers and warriors to Brood's north campaign.' He turned a humourless grin on Baruk. 'Within my city are children, priests and three elderly, exceedingly bookish warlocks.'

City? *There was a city within Moon's Spawn?*

A dun tone had entered Rake's eyes. 'I cannot defend an entire Moon. I cannot be everywhere at once. And as for Tayschrenn, he didn't give a damn about the people around him. I thought to dissuade him, make the price too high ...' He shook his head as if perplexed, then he looked to Baruk. 'To save the home of my people, I retreated.'

'Leaving Pale to fall—' Baruk shut his mouth, cursing his lack of tact.

But Rake merely shrugged. 'I didn't anticipate that I'd face a full assault. My presence alone had been keeping the Empire at bay for almost two years.'

'I've heard the Empress is short of patience,' murmured Baruk thoughtfully. His eyes narrowed, then he looked up. 'You have asked to meet with me, Anomander Rake, and so here we are. What is it you wish from me?'

'An alliance,' the Moon's lord answered.

'With me? Personally?'

'No games, Baruk.' Rake's voice was suddenly cold. 'I'm not fooled by that Council of idiots bickering at Majesty Hall. I know that it's you and your fellow mages who rule Darujhistan.' He rose and glared down with

eyes of grey. 'I'll tell you this. For the Empress your city is the lone pearl on this continent of mud. She wants it and what she wants she usually gets.'

Baruk reached down and plucked at the frayed edge of his robe. 'I see,' he said, in a low voice. 'Pale had its wizards.'

Rake frowned. 'Indeed.'

'Yet,' Baruk continued, 'when the battle was begun in earnest, your first thought was not for the alliance you made with the city but for the well-being of your Moon.'

'Who told you this?' Rake demanded.

Baruk looked up and raised both hands. 'Some of those wizards managed to escape.'

'They're in the city?' Rake's eyes had gone black.

Seeing them, Baruk felt sweat break out beneath his clothes. 'Why?' he asked.

'I want their heads,' Rake replied casually. He refilled his goblet and took a sip.

An icy hand had slipped around Baruk's heart and was now tightening. His headache had increased tenfold in the last few seconds. 'Why?' he asked again, the word coming out almost as a gasp.

If the Tiste Andii knew of the alchemist's sudden discomfort he made no sign of it. 'Why?' He seemed to roll the word in his mouth like wine, a light smile touching his lips. 'When the Moranth army came down from the mountains, and Tayschrenn rode at the head of his wizard cadre, and when word spread that an Empire Claw had infiltrated the city,' Rake's smile twisted into a snarl, 'the wizards of Pale fled.' He paused, as if reliving memories. 'I dispatched the Claw when they were but a dozen steps inside the walls.' He paused again, his face betraying a flash of regret. 'Had the city's wizards remained, the assault would have been repelled. Tayschrenn, it seemed, was preoccupied with ... *other* imperatives. He'd saturated his position – a hilltop – with defensive wards. Then he unleashed demons not

against me but against some of his companions. That baffled me but, rather than allow such conjurings to wander at will, I expended vital power destroying them.' He sighed and said, 'I pulled the Moon back mere minutes from its destruction. I left it to drift south and went after those wizards.'

'After them?'

'I tracked down all but two.' Rake gazed at Baruk. 'I want those two, preferably alive, but their heads will suffice.'

'You killed those you found? How?'

'With my sword, of course.'

Baruk recoiled as if struck. 'Oh,' he whispered. 'Oh.'

'The alliance,' Rake said, before draining his goblet.

'I'll speak to the Cabal on this matter,' Baruk answered, rising shakily to his feet. 'Word of the decision will be sent to you soon.' He stared at the sword strapped to the Tiste Andii's back. 'Tell me, if you get those wizards alive, will you use *that* on them?'

Rake frowned. 'Of course.'

Turning away, Baruk closed his eyes. 'You'll have their heads, then.'

Behind him Rake laughed harshly. 'There's too much mercy in your heart, Alchemist.'

The pale light beyond the window signified the dawn. Within the Phoenix Inn only one table remained occupied. Around it sat four men, one asleep in his chair with his head lying in a pool of stale beer. He snored loudly. The others were playing cards, two red-eyed with exhaustion while the last one studied his hand and talked. And talked.

'And then there was the time I saved Rallick Norn's life, at the back of All Eve's Street. Four, no, *five* nefarious hoodlums had backed the boy to a wall. He was barely standing, was Rallick, gushing blood from a hundred knife wounds. Clear to me was the grim fact that it couldn't last much

longer, that tussle. I come up on them six assassins from behind, old Kruppe with fire dancing on his fingertips – a magical spell of frightful violence. I uttered the cantrip in a single breath and lo! Six piles of ash at Rallick's feet. Six piles of ash aglitter with the coin from their wallets – hah! A worthy reward!'

Murillio leaned his long, elegant frame close to Crokus Younghand. 'Is this possible?' he whispered. 'For a turn to last as long as Kruppe's?'

Crokus grinned wearily at his friend. 'I don't mind, really. It's safe in here, and that's what counts for me.'

'Assassin's war, bosh!' Kruppe said, leaning back to mop his brow with a wilted silk handkerchief. 'Kruppe remains entirely unconvinced. Tell me, did you not see Rallick Nom in here earlier? Spoke long with Murillio here, the lad did. As calm as ever, was he not?'

Murillio grimaced. 'Nom gets like that every time he's just killed somebody. Lay down a card, dammit! I've early appointments to attend to.'

Crokus asked, 'So what was Rallick talking to you about?'

Murillio's answer was a mere shrug. He continued glaring at Kruppe.

The small man's pencil-thin eyebrows rose. 'Is it Kruppe's turn?'

Closing his eyes, Crokus slumped in his chair. He groaned. 'I saw three assassins on the rooftops, Kruppe. And the two that killed the third went after me, even though it's obvious I'm no assassin.'

'Well,' said Murillio, eyeing the young thief's tattered clothing and the cuts and scrapes on his face and hands, 'I'm inclined to believe you.'

'Fools! Kruppe sits at a table of fools.' Kruppe glanced down at the snoring man. 'And Coll here is the biggest of them all. But sadly gifted with self-knowledge. Hence his present state, from which many profane truths might be drawn. Appointments, Murillio? Kruppe didn't think the city's multitude of mistresses awoke so early in the day. After all, what might they see in their mirrors? Kruppe shivers at the thought.'

Crokus massaged the bruise hidden beneath his long, brown hair. He winced, then leaned forward. 'Come on, Kruppe,' he muttered. 'Play a card.'

'My turn?'

'Seems self-knowledge doesn't extend to whose turn it is,' Murillio commented drily.

Boots sounded on the stairs. The three turned to see Rallick Nom descending from the first floor. The tall, dark-skinned man looked rested. He wore his day cloak, a deep royal purple, clasped at the neck by a silver clamshell brooch. His black hair was freshly braided, framing his narrow, clean-shaven face. Rallick walked up to the table and reached down to grasp Coil's thinning hair. He raised the man's head from the pool of beer and bent forward to study Coil's blotched face. Then he gently set down the man's head, and pulled up a chair.

'Is this the same game as last night?'

'Of course,' Kruppe replied. 'Kruppe has these two men backed to the very wall, in danger of losing their very shirts! It's good to see you again, friend Rallick. The lad here,' Kruppe indicated Crokus with a limp hand, fingers fluttering, 'speaks endlessly of murder above our heads. A veritable downpour of blood! Have you ever heard such nonsense, Rallick Kruppe's friend?'

Rallick shrugged. 'Another rumour. This city was built on rumours.'

Crokus scowled to himself. It seemed that no one was willing to answer questions this morning. He wondered yet again what the assassin and Murillio had been talking about earlier; hunched as they'd been over a dimly lit table in one corner of the room, Crokus had suspected some sort of conspiracy. Not that such a thing was unusual for them, though most times Kruppe was at its centre.

Murillio swung his gaze to the bar. 'Sulty!' he called out. 'You awake?'

There was a mumbled response from behind the wooden counter, then Sulty, her blonde hair dishevelled and plump face looking plumper, stood up. 'Yah,' she mumbled. 'What?'

'Breakfast for my friends here, if you please.' Murillio climbed to his feet and cast a critical, obviously disapproving eye over his clothing. The soft billowing shirt, dyed a bright green, now hung on his lanky frame, wilted and beer-stained. His fine tanned leather pantaloons were creased and patchy. Sighing, Murillio stepped away from the table. 'I must bathe and change. As for the game, I surrender consumed by hopelessness. Kruppe, I now believe, will never play his card, thus leaving us trapped in the unlikely world of his recollections and reminiscences, potentially for ever. Goodnight, one and all.' He and Rallick locked gazes, then Murillio gave a faint nod.

Crokus witnessed the exchange and his scowl deepened. He watched Murillio leave, then glanced at Rallick. The assassin sat staring down at Coll, his expression as unreadable as ever.

Sulty wandered into the kitchen, and a moment later the clanking of pots echoed into the room.

Crokus tossed his cards into the table's centre and leaned back, closing his eyes.

'Does the lad surrender as well?' Kruppe asked.

Crokus nodded.

'Hah, Kruppe remains undefeated.' He set down his cards and tucked in a napkin at his thick, jiggling neck.

In the thief's mind suspicions of intrigue ran wild. First the assassin's war, now Rallick and Murillio had something cooking. He sighed mentally and opened his eyes. His whole body ached from the night's adventures, but he knew he'd been lucky. He stared down at Coll without seeing him. The vision of those tall, black assassins returned to him and he shivered. Yet, for all the dangers hounding his back up on the rooftops this past night, he had to admit how exciting it'd all been. After slamming that door behind him and quaffing the beer Sulty had thrust into his hand, his whole body had trembled for an hour afterwards.

His gaze focused on Coll. Coll, Kruppe, Murillio and Rallick. What a strange group – a drunkard, an obese mage of dubious abilities, a dandified fop and a killer.

Still, they were his best friends. His parents had succumbed to the Winged Plague when he'd been four years old. Since then his uncle Mammot had raised him. The old scholar had done the best he could, but it hadn't been enough. Crokus found the street's shadows and moonless nights on rooftops far more exciting than his uncle's mouldy books.

Now, however, he felt very much alone. Kruppe's mask of blissful idiocy never dropped, not even for an instant – all through the years when Crokus had been apprenticed to the fat man in the art of thievery, he'd never seen Kruppe act otherwise. Coil's life seemed to involve the relentless avoidance of sobriety, for reasons unknown to Crokus – though he suspected that, once, Coll had been something more. And now Rallick and Murillio had counted him out of some new intrigue.

Into his thoughts came an image – the moonlit limbs of a sleeping maiden – and he angrily shook his head.

Sulty arrived with breakfast, husks of bread fried in butter, a chunk of goat cheese, a stem of local grapes and a pot of Callows bitter coffee. She served Crokus first and he muttered his thanks.

Kruppe's impatience grew while Sulty served Rallick. 'Such impertinence,' the man said, adjusting his coat's wide, stained sleeves. 'Kruppe is of a mind to cast a thousand horrible spells on rude Sulty.'

'Kruppe had better not,' Rallick said.

'Oh, no, of course not,' Kruppe amended, wiping his brow with his handkerchief. 'A wizard of my skills would never belittle himself on a mere scullion, after all.'

Sulty turned to him. 'Scullion?' She snatched a bread husk from the plate and slapped it down on Kruppe's head. 'Don't worry,' she said, as she walked back to the bar. 'With hair like yours nobody'd notice.'

Kruppe pulled the husk from his head. He was about to toss it down on the floor, then changed his mind. He licked his lips. 'Kruppe is magnanimous this morning,' he said, breaking into a wide smile and setting the bread down on his plate. He leaned forward and laced together his pudgy fingers. 'Kruppe wishes to begin his meal with some grapes, please.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

I see a man
crouched in a fire
who leaves me cold
and wondering what
he is doing here so boldly
crouched in my pyre ...

Gadrobi Epitaph
Anonymous

This time, Kruppe's dream took him out through Marsh Gate, along South Road, then left on to Cutter Lake Road. Overhead the sky swirled a most unpleasant pattern of silver and pale green. 'All is in flux,' Kruppe gasped, his feet hurrying him along the dusty, barren road. 'The Coin has entered a child's possession, though he knows it not. Is it for Kruppe to walk this Monkey Road? Fortunate that Kruppe's perfectly round body is an example of perfect symmetry. One is not only born skilled at said balance, one must learn it through arduous practice. Of course, Kruppe is unique in never requiring practice – at anything.'

Off in the fields to his left, within a circle of young trees, a small fire cast a hazy red glow up among the budding branches. Kruppe's sharp eyes could make out a single figure seated there, seemingly holding its hands in the flames. 'Too many stones to turn underfoot,' he gasped, 'on this rocky, rutted road. Kruppe would try the ribbed earth, which is yet to green with the season's growth. Indeed, yon fire beckons.' He left the road and approached the circle of trees.

As he strode between two slim boles and stepped into the pool of light, the hooded figure turned slowly to study him, its face hidden in shadows

despite the fire before it. Though it held its hands in the flame, they withstood the heat, the long, sinuous fingers spread wide.

'I would partake of this warmth,' Kruppe said, with a slight bow. 'So rare within Kruppe's dreams of late.'

'Strangers wander through them,' the figure said, in a thin, oddly accented voice. 'Such as I. Have you summoned me, then? It has been a long time since I walked on soil.'

Kruppe's brows rose. 'Summoned? Nay, not Kruppe who is also a victim of his dreams. Imagine, after all, that Kruppe sleeps even now beneath warm blankets secure in his humble room. Yet see me, stranger, for I am cold, nay, chilled.'

The other laughed softly and beckoned Kruppe to the fire. 'I seek sensation once again,' it said, 'but my hands feel nothing. To be worshipped is to share the supplicant's pain. I fear my followers are no more.'

Kruppe was silent. He did not like the sombre mood of this dream. He held his hands before the fire yet felt little heat. A chill ache had settled into his knees. Finally he looked over the flames to the hooded figure opposite him. 'Kruppe thinks you are an Elder God. Have you a name?'

'I am known as K'rul.'

Kruppe stiffened. His guess had been correct. The thought of an Elder God awakened and wandering through his dreams sent his thoughts scampering like frightened rabbits. 'How have you come to be here, K'rul?' he asked, a tremor in his voice. All at once this place seemed too hot. He pulled his handkerchief from his sleeve and mopped sweat from his brow.

K'rul considered before answering, and Kruppe heard doubt in his voice. 'Blood has been spilled behind the walls of this glowing city, Kruppe, upon stone once holy in my name. This – this is new to me. Once I reigned in the minds of many mortals, and they fed me well with blood and split bones. Long before the first towers of stone rose to mortal whims, I walked among hunters.' The hood tilted upward and Kruppe felt immortal eyes fixing upon him. 'Blood has been spilled again, but that alone is not enough. I believe I

am here to await one who will be awakened. One I have known before, long ago.'

Kruppe digested this like sour bile. 'And what do you bring Kruppe?'

The Elder God rose abruptly. 'An ancient fire that will give you warmth in times of need,' he said. 'But I hold you to nothing. Seek the T'lan Imass who will lead the woman. They are the Awakeners. I must prepare for battle, I think. One I will lose.'

Kruppe's eyes widened with sudden comprehension. 'You are being used,' he breathed.

'Perhaps. If so, then the Child Gods have made a grave error. After all,' a ghastly smile seemed to come into his tone, 'I will lose a battle. But I will not die.' K'rul turned away from the fire then. His voice drifted back to Kruppe. 'Play on, mortal. Every god falls at a mortal's hands. Such is the only end to immortality.'

The Elder God's wistfulness was not lost on Kruppe. He suspected that a great truth had been revealed to him with those final words, a truth he was now given leave to use. 'And use it Kruppe shall,' he whispered.

The Elder God had left the pool of light, heading north-east across the fields. Kruppe stared at the fire. It licked the wood hungrily, but no ash was born, and though unfed since he'd arrived it did not dim. He shivered.

'In the hands of a child,' he muttered. 'This night, Kruppe is truly alone in the world. Alone.'

An hour before dawn Circle Breaker was relieved of his vigil at Despot's Barbican. This night none had come to rendezvous beneath the gate. Lightning played among the jagged peaks of the Tahlyn Mountains to the north as the man walked in solitude down the winding Charms of Anise Street in the Spice Quarter. Ahead and below glittered the Lakefront, the merchant trader ships from distant Callows, Elingarth and Kepler's Spite hunched dark and gloaming between gaslit stone piers.

A cool lake breeze carried to the man the smell of rain, though overhead the stars glistened with startling clarity. He had removed his tabard, folding it into a small leather satchel now slung on one shoulder. Only the plain shortsword strapped at his hip marked him as a soldier, yet a soldier without provenance.

He had divested himself of his official duties, and as he walked down towards the water, the years of service seemed to slough from his spirit. Bright were the memories of his childhood at these docks, to which he had been ever drawn by the allure of the strange traders as they swung into their berths like weary and weathered heroes returned from some elemental war. In those days it was not uncommon to see the galleys of the Freemen Privateers ease into the bay, sleek and riding low with booty. They hailed from such mysterious ports as Filman Orras, Fort By a Half, Dead Man's Story and Exile; names that rang of adventure in the ears of a lad who had never seen his home city from outside its walls.

The man slowed as he reached the foot of the stone pier. The years between him and that lad marched through his mind, a possession of martial images growing ever grimmer. If he searched out the many crossroads he had come to in the past, he saw their skies storm-warped, the lands ragged and wind-torn. The forces of age and experience worked on them now, and whatever choices he had made then seemed fated and almost desperate.

Is it only the young who know desperation? he wondered, as he moved to sit on the pier's stone sea-wall. Before him rippled the bay's sooty waters. Twenty feet below, the rock-studded shore lay sheathed in darkness, the glitter of broken glass and crockery here and there winking like stars.

The man turned slightly to face the right. His gaze travelled the slope there as it climbed to the summit, on which loomed the squat bulk of Majesty Hall. *Never reach too far.* A simple lesson of life he had learned long ago on the burning deck of a corsair, its belly filling with the sea as it drifted outside the pinnacle fortifications of a city named Broken Jaw. Hubris, the scholars would call the fiery end of the Freemen Privateers.

Never reach too far. The man's eyes held on Majesty Hall. The deadlock that had come with the assassination of Councilman Lim still held within

those walls. The Council raced aflurry in circles, more precious hours spent on eager speculation and gossip than on the matters of state. Turban Orr, his victory on the voting floor snatched from his hands in the last moment, now flung his hounds down every trail, seeking the spies he was convinced had infiltrated his nest. The councilman was no fool.

Overhead a flock of grey gulls swept lakeward, crying into the night-chilled air. He drew a breath, hunched his shoulders and pulled his gaze with an effort from Majesty Hill.

Too late to concern himself about reaching too far. Since the day the Eel's agent had come to him, the man's future was sealed; to some it would be called treason. And perhaps, in the end, it *was* treason. Who could say what lay in the Eel's mind? Even his principal agent – the man's contact – professed ignorance of his master's plans.

His thoughts returned to Turban Orr. He'd set himself against a cunning man, a man of power. His only defence against Orr lay in anonymity. It wouldn't last.

He sat on the pier, awaiting the Eel's agent. And he would deliver into that man's hands a message for the Eel. How much would change with the delivery of that missive? Was it wrong for him to seek help, to threaten his frail anonymity – the solitude that gave him so much inner strength, that stiffened his own resolve? Yet, to match wits with Turban Orr – he did not think he could do it alone.

The man reached into his jerkin and withdrew the scroll. A crossroads marked where he now stood, he recognized that much. In answer to his ill-measured fear, he'd written the plea for help on this scroll.

It would be an easy thing to do, to surrender now. He hefted the frail parchment in his hands, feeling its slight weight, the vague oiliness of the coating, the rough weave of its tie-string. An easy, desperate thing to do.

The man lifted his head. The sky had begun to pale, the lake wind picking up the day's momentum. There would be rain, coming from the north as it often did at this time of year. A cleansing of the city, a freshening of its

spice-laden breath. He slipped the string from the scroll and unfurled the parchment.

So easy.

With slow, deliberate movements, the man tore up the scroll. He let the ragged pieces drift down, scattering into the gloom of the lake's shadowed shore. The rising waves swept them outward to dot the turgid swells like flecks of ash.

Coming from somewhere in the back of his mind, he thought he heard a coin spinning. It seemed a sad sound.

A few minutes later he left the pier. The Eel's agent, out on his morning stroll, would in passing note his contact's absence and simply continue on his way.

He made his way along the Lakefront Street with the summit of Majesty Hill dwindling behind him. As he passed, the first of the silk merchants appeared, laying out their wares on the wide paved walk. Among the silks the man recognized the dyed lavender twists and bolts of Illem, the pale yellows of Setta and Lest – two cities to the south-east he knew had been annexed by the Pannion Seer in the last month – and the heavy bold twists of Sarrokalle. A dwindled sampling: all trade from the north had ended under Malazan dominion.

He turned from the lake at the entry to the Scented Wood and headed into the city. Four streets ahead his single room waited on the second floor of a decaying tenement, grey and silent with the coming dawn, its thin, warped door latched and locked. In that room he allowed no place for memories; nothing to mark him in a wizard's eye or tell the sharp-witted spy-hunter details of his life. In that room, he remained anonymous even to himself.

The Lady Simtal paced. These last few days too much of her hard-won gold had been spent smoothing the waters. That damn bitch of Lim's had not let grief get in the way of her greed. Barely two days shrouded in black and

then out on the courts hanging on that fop Murillio's arm, smug as a tart at a ball.

Simtal's pencilled brows knitted slightly. Murillio: that young man had a way of being seen. He might be worth cultivation, all things considered.

She stopped pacing and faced the man sprawled on her bed. 'So, you've learned nothing.' A hint of contempt had slipped into her tone and she wondered if he'd caught it.

Councilman Turban Orr, his heavily scarred forearm covering his eyes, did not move as he replied, 'I've told you all this. There's no knowing where that poisoned quarrel came from, Simtal. Hell, poisoned! What assassin uses poison these days? Vorcan's got them so studded with magic everything else is obsolete.'

'You're digressing,' she said, satisfied that he'd missed the careless unveiling of her sentiments.

'It's like I said,' Orr continued. 'Lim was involved in more than one, uh, delicate venture. The assassination's probably unconnected with you. It could have been anyone's balcony, it just happened to be yours.'

Lady Simtal crossed her arms. 'I don't believe in coincidence, Turban. Tell me, was it coincidence that his death broke your majority – the night before the vote?' She saw the man's cheek twitch and knew she'd stung him. She smiled and moved to the bed. She sat and ran a hand along his bared thigh. 'In any case, have you checked on him lately?'

'Him?'

Simtal scowled, withdrawing her hand and standing. 'My beloved dispossessed, you idiot.'

Turban Orr's mouth curved into a smug smile. 'I always keep a check on him for you, my dear. Nothing's changed in that area. He hasn't sobered up since you threw him out on his arse.' The man sat up and reached to the bedpost where his clothes hung. He began dressing.

Simtal whirled to him. 'What are you doing?' she demanded, her voice strident.

'What's it look like?' Turban pulled on his breeches. 'The debate rages on at Majesty Hall. My influence is required.'

'To do what? Bend yet another councilman to your will?'

He slipped on his silk shirt, still smiling. 'That, and other things.'

Simtal rolled her eyes. 'Oh, of course – the spy. I'd forgotten about him.'

'Personally,' Orr resumed, 'I believe the proclamation of neutrality to the Malazans will go through – perhaps tomorrow or the next day.'

She laughed harshly. 'Neutrality! You're beginning to believe your own propaganda. What you want, Turban Orr, is power, the naked absolute power that comes with being a Malazan High Fist. You think this the first step to paving your road into the Empress's arms. At the city's expense, but you don't give a damn about that!'

Turban sneered up at Simtal. 'Stay out of politics, woman. Darujhistan's fall to the Empire is inevitable. Better a peaceful occupation than a violent one.'

'Peaceful? Are you blind to what happened to Pale's nobility? Oh, the ravens feasted on delicate flesh for days. This Empire devours noble blood.'

'What happened at Pale isn't as simple as you make it,' Turban said. 'There was a Moranth reckoning involved, a clause in the alliance writ. Such culling will not occur here – and what if it does? We could use it, as far as I'm concerned.' His grin returned. 'So much for your heart bleeding to the city's woes. All that interests you is you. Save the righteous citizen offal for your fawns, Simtal.' He adjusted his leggings.

Simtal stepped to the bedpost, reaching down to touch the silver pommel of Orr's duelling sword. 'You should kill him and be done with it,' she said.

'Back to him again?' The councilman laughed as he rose. 'Your brain works with all the subtlety of a malicious child.' He collected his sword and

strapped it on. 'It's a wonder you wrested anything from that idiot husband of yours – you were so evenly matched in matters of cunning.'

'The easiest thing to break is a man's heart,' Simtal said, with a private smile. She lay down on the bed. Stretching her arms and arching her back, she said, 'What about Moon's Spawn? It's still just hanging there.'

Gazing down at her, his eyes travelling along her body, the councilman replied distractedly, 'We've yet to work out a way to get a message up there. We've set up a tent in its shadow and stationed representatives in it, but that mysterious lord just ignores us.'

'Maybe he's dead,' Simtal said, relaxing with a sigh. 'Maybe the Moon's just sitting there because there's nobody left alive inside. Have you thought of that, dear Councilman?'

Turban Orr turned to the door. 'We have. I'll see you tonight?'

'I want him killed,' Simtal said.

The councilman reached for the latch. 'Maybe. I'll see you tonight?' he asked again.

'Maybe.'

Turban Orr's hand rested on the latch, then he opened the door and left the room.

Lying on her bed, Lady Simtal sighed. Her thoughts shifted to a certain dandy, whose loss to a certain widow would be a most delicious coup.

Murillio sipped spiced wine. 'The details are sketchy,' he said, making a face as the fiery alcohol stung his lips.

In the street below a brilliantly painted carriage clattered past, drawn by three white horses in black bridles. The man gripping the reins was robed in black and hooded. The horses tossed their heads, ears pinned back and eyes rolling, but the driver's broad, veined hands held them in check. On either

side of the carriage walked middle-aged women. Bronze cups sat on their shaved heads from which unfurled wavering streams of scented smoke.

Murillio leaned against the railing and looked down upon the troupe. 'The bitch Fander's being carted out,' he said. 'Bloody grim rituals, if you ask me.' He sat back in the plush chair and smiled at his companion, raising the goblet. 'The Wolf Goddess of Winter dies her seasonal death, on a carpet of white, no less. And in a week's time the Gedderone Fête fills the streets with flowers, soon to clog gutters and block drains throughout the city.'

The young woman across from him smiled, her eyes on her own goblet of wine, which she held in both hands like an offering. 'Which details were you referring to?' she asked, glancing up at him briefly.

'Details?'

She smiled faintly. 'The sketchy ones.'

'Oh.' Murillio waved one gloved hand dismissively. 'Lady Simtal's version held that Councilman Lim had come in person to acknowledge her formal invitation.'

'Invitation? Do you mean to the festive she's throwing on Gedderone's Eve?'

Murillio blinked. 'Of course. Surely your house has been invited?'

'Oh, yes. And you?'

'Alas, no,' Murillio said, smiling.

The woman fell silent, her eyelids lowering in thought.

Murillio glanced back to the street below. He waited. Such things, after all, moved of their own accord, and even he could not guess the pace or track of a woman's thoughts, especially when it had to do with sex. And this was most assuredly a play for favours – Murillio's best game, and he always played it through. Never disappoint them, that was the key. The closest-held secret is the one that never sours with age.

Few of the other tables on the balcony were occupied, the establishment's noble patrons preferring the scented airs of the dining room within. Murillio found comfort in the buzzing life of the streets, and he knew his guest did too – at least in this instance. With all the noise rising from below, their chances of being overheard were slight.

As his gaze wandered aimlessly along Morul's Street of Jewels, he stiffened slightly, eyes widening as they focused on a figure standing in a doorway opposite him. He shifted in his seat, dropping his left hand past the stone railing, out of the woman's sight. Then he jerked it repeatedly, glaring down at the figure.

Rallick Norn's smile broadened. He stepped away from the doorway and strolled up the street, pausing to inspect an array of pearls laid out on an ebony table in front of a store. The proprietor took a nervous step forward then relaxed as Rallick moved on.

Murillio sighed, leaning back and taking a mouthful of liquor. *Idiot!* The man's face, his hands, his walk, his eyes, all said one thing: *killer.* Hell, even his wardrobe had all the warmth and vitality of an executioner's uniform.

When it came to subtlety Rallick Nom was sorely lacking. Which made this whole thing rather odd, that such a complex scheme could have been born from the assassin's rigidly geometric brain. Still, whatever its origins, it was pure genius.

'Do you dearly wish to attend, Murillio?' the woman asked.

Murillio smiled his warmest smile. He looked away. 'It's a large estate, isn't it?'

'Lady Simtal's? Indeed, fraught with rooms.' The woman dipped one dainty finger into the pungent, fiery liquid, then raised it to her lips, inserting it into her mouth as if in afterthought. She continued studying the goblet in her other hand. 'I would expect a good many of the servants' quarters, though lacking in the simplest needs of luxury, will remain empty for much of the night.'

No clearer invitation did Murillio require. Rallick's plan centred on this very moment, and its consequences. Still, adultery had one drawback. Murillio had no desire to meet this woman's husband on the duelling piste. He drove such disturbing thoughts away with another mouthful of wine. 'I would love to attend the Lady's festival, on one condition.' He looked up and locked gazes with the woman. 'That you will grace me with your company that night – for an hour or two, that is.' His brow assumed a troubled furrow. 'I would not wish to impinge on your husband's claim on you, of course.' Which is exactly what he would be doing, and they both knew it.

'Of course,' the woman replied, suddenly coy. 'That would be unseemly. How many invitations do you require?'

'Two,' he said. 'Best that I be seen with a companion.'

'Yes, it's best.'

Murillio glanced down at his now empty goblet with a rueful expression. Then he sighed. 'Alas, I must be taking my leave.'

'I admire your self-discipline,' the woman said.

You won't on Gedderone's Eve, Murillio answered silently, as he rose from his chair. 'The Lady of Chance has graced me with this meeting of ours,' he said, bowing. 'Until the eve, Lady Orr.'

'Until then,' the councilman's wife answered, seeming already to lose interest in him. 'Goodbye.'

Murillio bowed again, then left the balcony. Among the crowded tables more than a few noblewomen's heavy-lidded eyes watched him leave.

Morul's Street of Jewels ended at Sickle Gate. Rallick felt the wide eyes of the two guards beside the ramp following him as he passed through the passage between the massive stones of the Third Tier Wall. Ocelot had told him to make it plain, and while Murillio was of the opinion that only a blind

man could ever mistake him for anything other than a killer, Rallick had taken pains to achieve the obvious.

The guards did nothing, of course. Giving the appearance of being a murderer wasn't the same as being one in truth. The city's laws were strict in such things. He knew he might find himself being followed as he strode down the opulent streets of Higher Estates, but he'd leave them to it, making no effort to lose them. Darujhistan's nobles paid good money to loose spies on to the streets day after day. Might as well make them earn their bread.

Rallick had no sympathy for them. He did not, however, share the commoner's hatred for the nobility. Their constant airs, prickly honours and endless squabbles made for good business, after all.

When the Malazan Empire came that would end, he suspected. In the Empire, assassin guilds were illegal, and those of the trade who were deemed worthy were enlisted into the secret ranks of the Claw. As for those who weren't considered worthy, they simply disappeared. The nobles didn't fare much better, if the rumours from Pale held any truth. It would be a different world when the Empire came, and Rallick wasn't sure he wanted to be part of it.

Still, there were things left to achieve. He wondered if Murillio had succeeded in getting the invitations. Everything hinged on that. There'd been a long-drawn-out argument about it the night before. Murillio preferred widows. Adultery had never been his style. But Rallick had remained insistent, and finally Murillio had given in.

The assassin still wondered about his friend's reluctance. His first thought was that Murillio feared the possibility of a duel with Turban Orr. But Murillio was no slouch with a rapier. Rallick had practised with him in secluded places enough times to suspect that he was an Adept – and to that even Turban Orr could not make claim.

No, it wasn't fear that made Murillio shy from this part of the plan. It dawned on Rallick that there was a moral issue at stake. A whole new side of Murillio had revealed itself to Rallick then.

He was pondering the implications when his gaze found a familiar face among the street's crowd. He stopped and studied the surrounding buildings, and his eyes widened as he realized where his wanderings had taken him. His attention snapped back to the familiar figure appearing every few moments on the street's opposite side. The assassin's eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

Beneath the mid-morning's blue and silver hue, Crokus walked along Lakefront Street surrounded by the bedlam of merchants and shoppers. A dozen streets ahead rose the city hills beyond the Third Tier Wall. On the easternmost hill stood the K'rul belfry, its green-patched bronze scales glimmering in the sun's light.

To his mind the tower challenged Majesty Hall's bright mien, gazing over the estates and buildings crouched on the lower hills with its rheumed eyes and history-scarred face – a jaded cast to its mocking gleam.

Crokus shared something of the tower's imagined sardonic reserve for the pretence so rife in Majesty Hall, an emotion of his uncle's that had seeped into the lad over the years. Adding fuel to this fire was a healthy dose of youthful resentment towards anything that smacked of authority. And though he gave it little thought, these provided the primary impulses for his thieving activities. Yet he'd never before understood the most subtle and hurtful insult his thefts delivered — the invasion and violation of privacy. Again and again, in his dreamy wanderings both day and night, the vision of the young woman asleep in her bed returned to him.

Eventually Crokus grasped that the vision had everything to do with – *everything.* He'd come into her room, a place where the noble brats drooling at her heels couldn't enter, a place where she might talk to the ragged dolls of her childhood, when innocence didn't just mean a flower not yet plucked. Her sanctuary. And he'd despoiled it, he'd snatched from this young woman her most precious possession: her privacy.

No matter that she was the daughter of the D'Arles, that she was born to the pure blood – untainted by the Lady of Beggars' touch – that she would

flow through life protected and shielded from the degradations of the real world. No matter any of these things. For Crokus, his crime against her was tantamount to rape. To have so boldly shattered her world ...

His thoughts a storm of self-recrimination, the young thief turned up the Charms of Anise Street, pushing through the crowds.

In his mind the once-stalwart walls of righteous outrage were crumbling. The hated nobility had shown him a face that now haunted him with its beauty, and tugged him in a hundred unexpected directions. The sweet scents of the spice stores, wafting like perfume on the warming breeze, had unaccountably lodged a nameless emotion in his throat. The shouts of Daru children playing in the alleys brimmed his eyes with sentimental maundering.

Crokus strode through Clove Gate and entered Osserc Narrow. Directly ahead rose the ramp leading into Higher Estates. As he approached he had to move quickly to one side to avoid a large carriage coming up on him from behind. He didn't need to see the crest adorning the carriage's side panel to recognize its house. The horses snapped and kicked, surging forward heedless of anyone or anything in their path. Crokus paused to watch the carriage clatter up the ramp, people scattering to either side. From what he'd heard of Councilman Turban Orr, it seemed the duellist's horses matched his contempt for those he supposedly served.

By the time he reached the Orr estate the carriage had already passed through the outer gate. Four burly private guards had resumed their station to either side. The wall at their backs rose a full fifteen feet, topped with rusty iron cuttings set in sun-baked clay. Pumice torches lined the wall at ten-foot intervals. Crokus strolled past the gate, ignoring the guards. At the base the wall looked to be about four feet in breadth, the rough-hewn bricks a standard squared foot. He continued on along the street, then turned right to check the wall fronting the alley. A single service door, tarred oak banded in bronze, was set in this wall at the nearest corner.

And no guard. The shadows of the opposite estate draped a heavy cloak across the narrow aisle. Crokus entered the damp, musty darkness. He had travelled half the length of the alley when a hand closed around his mouth

from behind and a dagger's sharp point pressed against his side. Crokus froze, then grunted as the hand pulled his face round. He found himself looking into familiar eyes.

Rallick Nom withdrew his dagger and stepped back, a severe frown marring his brow. Crokus gaped then licked his lips. 'Rallick, Bern's Heart, you scared me!'

'Good,' the assassin said. He came close. 'Listen carefully, Crokus. You'll not try Orr's estate. You'll not go near it again.'

The thief shrugged. 'It was just a thought, Nom.'

'Kill it,' Rallick said.

His lips thinning into a straight line, Crokus nodded. 'All right.' He turned and headed towards the strip of bright sunlight marking the next street. He felt Rallick's eyes on him until he stepped out on to Traitor's Track. He stopped. Off to his left climbed High Gallows Hill, its immaculate flowered slope a burst of colours surrounding the fifty-three Winding Steps. The five nooses above the platform swung slightly in the breeze, their shadows streaks of black reaching down the slope to the cobbles of the street. It had been a long time since the last High Criminal was hanged, while off in the Gadrobi District the Low Gallows' ropes were replaced weekly due to stretching. An odd contrast to mark these tense times.

Abruptly, he shook his head. Avoiding the turmoil of questions was too much of an effort. Had Nom followed him? No, a lesser likelihood than the assassin having marked Orr or someone in the estate for murder. A bold contract. He wondered who had had the guts to offer it – a fellow noble, no doubt. But the courage of the contract's offering paled when compared to Rallick's accepting it.

In any case, the weight of the assassin's warning was enough to crush any idea of thieving Orr's estate – at least for now. Crokus jammed his hands into his pockets. As he walked, his thoughts lost in a maze of dead ends, he frowned with the realization that one of his hands, probing deep in the pocket, had closed around a coin.

He withdrew it. Yes, it was the coin he'd found on the night of the assassinations. He recalled its inexplicable appearance, clattering at his feet an instant before the assassin's crossbow quarrel whizzed past. Beneath the bright morning light Crokus now took the time to examine it. The first side he held up before him displayed the profile of a young man, with an amused expression, wearing some kind of floppy hat. Tiny rune-like lettering ran around the edge – a language the thief didn't recognize as it was so very different from the cursive Daru script with which he was familiar.

Crokus turned the coin. How odd! Another head, this one a woman's facing the other way. The etched script here was of a style different from the opposite side, a kind of left-slanting hatchwork. The woman looked young, with features similar to the man's; her expression held nothing of amusement, seeming to the thief's eyes cold and unyielding.

The metal was old, streaked here and there with raw copper and pitted around the faces with rough tin. The coin felt surprisingly heavy, though he concluded that its only worth lay in its uniqueness. He'd seen the coinage of Callows, Genabackis, Amat El and, once, the ridged bars of the Seguleh, but none had looked like this one.

Where had it fallen from? Had his clothing picked it up somewhere, or had he kicked it into motion while crossing the roof? Or had it been among the D'Arle maiden's treasure? Crokus shrugged. In any case, its arrival had been timely.

By this time his walk had taken him to the East Gate. Just outside the city wall and along the road called Jatem's Worry, crouched the handful of sagging buildings named Worrytown: the thief's destination. The gate remained open during daylight hours, and a slow-plodding line of vegetable-carts crowded the narrow passage. Among them, he saw as he pushed his way along one edge, were the first wagonloads of refugees from Pale, those who'd managed to slip through the siege lines during the battle and had crossed the south Rhivi Plain and then through the Gadrobi Hills and finally on to Jatem's Worry. Scanning their faces he saw a fiery desperation dulled by exhaustion: they looked upon the city with a jaded

eye towards its meagre defences, realizing that they'd bought only a short measure of time with their flight, yet too tired to care.

Disturbed by what he saw, Crokus hurried through the gate and approached Worrytown's largest structure, a rambling wooden tavern. Over the door hung a board on which had been painted, decades ago, a three-legged ram. To the thief's mind, the painting had nothing to do with the tavern's name, which was the Boar's Tears. The coin still in one hand, Crokus entered and paused just inside.

A few desultory faces turned to regard him briefly, then swung back to their cups. At a table in a gloomy corner opposite, Crokus saw a familiar figure, its hands raised above its head and gesticulating wildly. A grin tugged the thief's lips, and he strode forward.

'... and then did Kruppe sweep with motion so swift as to be unseen by any the king's crown and sceptre from the sarcophagus lid. Too many priests in this tomb, thinks Kruppe then, one less 'twould be a relief to all lest the dead king's musty breath shorten and so awaken his wraith. Many times afore this had Kruppe faced a wraith's wrath in some deep pit of D'rek, droning its list of life-crimes and bemoaning its need to devour my soul – harrah! Kruppe was ever too elusive for such sundry spirits and their knock-kneed chatter—'

Crokus laid a hand on Kruppe's damp shoulder, and the shiny round face swung up to observe him. 'Ah!' Kruppe exclaimed, waving a hand towards his lone companion at the table and explaining, 'An apprentice past comes to fawn in due fashion! Crokus, be seated by all means possible. Wench! Some more of your finest wine, haste!'

Crokus eyed the man seated opposite Kruppe. 'Seems you two might be busy right now.'

Hope flared in the man's expression and he rose quickly. 'Oh, no,' he exclaimed. 'By all means interrupt.' His eyes darted to Kruppe then back to Crokus. 'I must be leaving in any event, I assure you! Good day to you, Kruppe. Until some other time, then.' The man bobbed his head then departed.

'Precipitous creature,' Kruppe muttered, reaching for the mug of wine the man had left behind. 'Ah, look at this,' he said, frowning up at Crokus, 'nigh two-thirds full. A potential waste!' Kruppe drank it down in one swift gulp, then sighed. 'Said potential averted, Dessembrae be praised.'

Crokus sat. 'Was that man your trader contact?' he asked.

'Heavens, no.' Kruppe waved a hand. 'A poor refugee from Pale, wandering lost. Fortunate for him was Kruppe, whose brilliant insights have sent him—'

'Straight out the door,' Crokus finished, laughing.

Kruppe scowled.

The serving woman arrived with an earthen carafe of sour-smelling wine. Kruppe refilled the mugs. 'And now, wonders Kruppe, what would this expertly trained lad seek from this one-time master of all arts nefarious? Or have you triumphed yet again and come with booty atucked, seeking proper dispensation and the like?'

'Well, yes – I mean, no, not quite.' Crokus glanced around, then leaned forward. 'It's about last time,' he whispered. 'I knew you'd be out here to sell the stuff I brought you.'

Kruppe leaned forward to meet the lad, their faces inches apart. 'The D'Arle acquisition?' he whispered back, waggling his eyebrows.

'Exactly! Have you sold it off yet?'

Kruppe pulled a handkerchief from a sleeve and mopped his brow. 'What with all this talk of war, the traders' routes are all amiss. So, to answer your question, uhm, not quite yet, admits Kruppe—'

'Great!'

Kruppe started at the lad's shout, his eyes squeezing shut. When they opened again they were thin slits. 'Ah, Kruppe understands. The lad wishes their return to his possession so that he might seek higher recompense elsewhere?'

Crokus blinked. 'No, of course not. I mean, yes, I want it back. But I'm not planning on fencing it anywhere. That is, I'm still dealing with you on everything else. Only this one's special.' As he spoke Crokus felt heat rise to his face, and was thankful for the gloom. 'A special case, Kruppe.'

A broad smile broke on Kruppe's round face. 'Why, most certainly, then, lad. Shall I deliver said items to you this eve? Excellent, consider the matter closed. Pray, tell, what do you have in yon hand there?'

Crokus stared in confusion, then he glanced down at his hand. 'Oh, just a coin,' he explained, showing it to Kruppe. 'I picked it up the same night I thieved D'Arle's. Two-headed, see?'

'Indeed? May Kruppe examine the peculiar item more closely?'

Crokus obliged, then reached for the mug of wine. He leaned back. 'I was thinking of Orr's estate next,' he said casually, his eyes fixed on Kruppe.

'Mmm.' Kruppe turned the coin in his hand again and again. 'Poorest quality cast,' he muttered. 'Crooked stamping, too. Orr's estate, you say? Kruppe advises caution. The house is well protected. The metallurgist who foundried this should have been hanged, indeed, probably was, thinks Kruppe. Black copper, no less. Cheap tin, temperatures all too cool. Favour me, Crokus? Peruse the scene in the street from yon door. If you spy a red and green merchant's wagon wobbling into town, Kruppe would be much obliged for such information.'

Crokus rose and crossed the room to the door. Opening it he stepped outside and glanced around. Seeing no wagon in sight, the youth shrugged again and went back inside. He returned to the table. 'No merchant wagon.'

'Ah, well,' Kruppe said. He set down the coin on the table. 'Altogether worthless, judges wise Kruppe. You may part with it at your leisure.'

Crokus collected the coin and slipped it into his pocket. 'No, I'm keeping it. For good luck.'

Kruppe looked up, his eyes bright, but Crokus had his attention on the mug in his hands. The fat man glanced away, sighing. 'Kruppe must needs

depart immediately, if this eve's rendezvous is to be propitious for all involved.'

Crokus drained his wine. 'We can head back together.'

'Excellent.' Kruppe rose, pausing to brush crumbs from his chest. 'Shall we be off, then?' He looked up to see Crokus frowning down at his hand. 'Has something smitten the lad?' he asked quickly.

Crokus started. He looked away guiltily, the colour rising in his face. 'No,' he mumbled. He glanced again at his hand. 'I must've picked up some wax somewhere,' he explained. He rubbed his hand on his leg and grinned sheepishly. 'Let's go.'

'It will be a fine day for a walk, pronounces Kruppe, who is wise in all things.'

White Gold's Round encircled an abandoned tower with a panoply of brightly dyed awnings. The goldsmith merchant shops, each with their own security guards loitering outside, faced out on the round street, the aisles between them narrow cracks leading to the tower's ruined compound.

The many tales of death and madness surrounding Hinter's Tower and its environs kept it empty and, uppermost in the minds of the goldsmiths, an unlikely approach to their precious stores.

As the afternoon waned towards dusk, the Round's crowds thinned and the private guards grew more wary. Iron grilles rattled into place over storefronts here and there, and among the few that remained open, torches were ignited.

Murillio entered the Round from the Third Tier Road, pausing every now and then to examine a shopkeeper's wares. Wrapped in a shimmering blue cloak from the Malle Waste, Murillio knew his ostentatious display of wealth would do much to allay suspicion.

He came to one shop in particular, framed on either side by unlit stores. The goldsmith, narrow-faced and pebble-nosed, leaned hawkishly on his

counter, his weathered hands before him bearing tiny grey scars that looked like raven tracks on mud. One finger tapped a restless beat. Murillio approached, meeting the man's beetle eyes.

'Is this the shop of Krute of Talient?'

'I'm Krute,' the goldsmith grated sourly, as if disgruntled with his lot in life. 'Talient pearls, set in Bloodgold from the mines of Moap and Belt, none other to be found in all Darujhistan.' He leaned forward and spat past Murillio, who involuntarily stepped to one side.

'No customers this day?' he asked, pulling a handkerchief from his sleeve and touching his lips.

Krute's gaze tightened. 'Only one,' he said. 'Perused a cache of Goaliss gems, rare as dragon's milk and suckled from rock as grim. A hundred slaves lost to each stone prised from the angry veins.' Krute's shoulders jerked and his eyes darted. 'Out the back I keep them, lest temptation spatter the street with blood, and like.'

Murillio nodded. 'Sound practice. Did he purchase any?'

Krute grinned, revealing blackened stumps for teeth. 'One, but not the best. Come, I'll show you.' He went to the side door and opened it. 'Through here, then.'

Murillio entered the shop. Black curtains covered the walls, and the air was musty with old sweat. Krute led him into the back room, which if anything was more rank and stifling than the first. The goldsmith dropped the curtain between the two rooms and faced Murillio.

'Move quickly! I've laid out a horde of fool's gold and worthless stones on the counter out front. If any sharp-eyed customer marks them this hole will be finished.' He kicked at the back wall and a panel swung from its hinges. 'Crawl through, dammit, and tell Rallick that the Guild is not pleased with his generosity regarding our secrets. Go!'

Murillio fell to his knees and pushed his way through the portal, the earthen floor damp beneath his hands and staining his knees. He groaned his distaste as the door swung down behind him, then climbed to his feet.

Before him rose Hinter's Tower, its mould-ridden stone walls glistening in the dying light. An overgrown cobbled pathway led up to the arched entrance bereft of a door and heavy with shadows. Of the chamber within Murillio saw only darkness.

Roots from the scraggy scrub oaks lining the path had pushed most of the cobbles up from the earth, making the way treacherous. After a cautious minute Murillio arrived at the doorway. He narrowed his gaze and tried to pierce the darkness. 'Rallick?' he hissed. 'Where the hell are you?'

A voice spoke behind him. 'You're late.'

Murillio spun, a long, thin duelling rapier in his left hand rasping from its sheath and sweeping low into guard position, a main-gauche appearing in his right hand as he dropped into a defensive crouch, then relaxed. 'Dammit, Rallick!'

The assassin grunted in amusement, eyeing the rapier's razor-sharp tip, which had but a moment earlier hovered inches from his solar plexis. 'Good to see your reflexes have not dulled, friend. All that wine and those pastries seem not to have girdled you ... much.'

Murillio resheathed his weapons. 'I expected to find you in the tower.'

Eyes widening, Rallick said, 'Are you mad? The place is haunted.'

'You mean that's not just a story you assassins made up to keep people away?'

Rallick turned and made his way to a lower terrace that had once overlooked the garden. White stone benches squatted in the wiry yellow grass like the stained bones of some gargantuan beast. Below the terrace, Murillio saw as he joined the assassin, sprawled a muddy, algae-filled pond. Frogs croaked and mosquitoes buzzed in the tepid air. 'Some nights,' Rallick said as he brushed dead leaves from one of the benches, 'wraiths crowd the entrance – you can walk right up to them, listen to their pleas and threats. They all want out.' He sat down.

Murillio remained standing, his gaze on the tower. 'What of Hinter himself? Does his wraith number among them?'

'No. The madman sleeps within, or so it's said. The wraiths are trapped in the sorcerer's nightmares – he holds on to them, and even Hood cannot draw them to his cold bosom. Do you wish to know where those wraiths have come from, Murillio?' Rallick grinned. 'Enter the tower, and you'll discover it first hand.'

Murillio had been about to go into the tower when Rallick had surprised him. 'Thanks for the warning,' he snapped sarcastically, gathering his cloak and sitting down.

Rallick waved the mosquitoes from his face. 'Well?'

'I have them,' Murillio said. 'Lady Orr's most trusted hand-servant delivered them this afternoon.' He removed from inside his cloak a bamboo tube tied in blue ribbon. 'Two invitations to Lady Simtal's Fete, as promised.'

'Good.' The assassin looked quickly at his friend. 'You've not seen Kruppe's nose twitch?'

'Not yet. Ran into him this afternoon. Seems Crokus is making some bizarre demands. Of course,' Murillio added, scowling, 'who can tell when Kruppe's caught wind of something? In any case, I've seen nothing to suggest the slippery little gnome suspects we're up to anything.'

'What was that you said about Crokus making bizarre demands?'

'A peculiar thing, that,' Murillio mused. 'When I dropped by the Phoenix Inn this afternoon Kruppe was delivering to the lad the pickings from his last job. Now, surely Crokus hasn't abandoned Kruppe as his fence – we all would've caught wind of that.'

'That was from an estate, wasn't it? Whose?' Rallick asked.

'D'Arle's,' Murillio answered, then his eyebrows rose. 'Kiss of Gedderone! The D'Arle maiden! The ripe one with the cheeks – she's being shown at damn near every gathering, all the frilly lads leaving a trail for the mop-boys. Oh, my! Our young thief is perchance smitten, and now keeps her baubles for himself. Of all the hopeless dreams a boy could have, he's reached for the worst.'

'Maybe,' Rallick said quietly. 'Maybe not. A word to his uncle ...'

Murillio's pained expression lifted. 'A nudge in the right direction? Yes, finally! Mammot will be pleased—'

'Patience,' Rallick interjected. 'Turning a thieving child into a man of standing and learning will require more work than a swooning heart will manage.'

Murillio frowned. 'Well, forgive me for being so excited at the prospect of saving the lad's life.'

Rallick's smile was soft. 'Never regret such pleasure,' he said.

Catching the assassin's tone, Murillio sighed, the sharp edges of his sarcasm sinking away. 'It's been many years since we had so many things of hope to strive for,' he said quietly.

'The path to one will be bloody,' Rallick said. 'Don't forget that. But, yes, it's been a long time. I wonder if Kruppe even remembers such days.'

Murillio snorted. 'Kruppe's memory is revised hourly. All that holds him together is fear of being discovered.'

Rallick's eyes darkened. 'Discovered?'

His friend seemed far away but then he collected himself and smiled. 'Oh, worn suspicions, no more. He's a slippery one, is Kruppe.'

Rallick chuckled at Murillio's mocking syntax. He studied the pond before them. 'Yes,' he agreed, after a time, 'he's the slippery one, all right.' He stood. 'Krute will be wanting to close up. The Round's asleep by now.'

'Right.'

The two men left the terrace, methane mists swirling around their legs. As they reached the path Murillio turned for a look at the tower's doorway, wondering if he could see the gibbering wraiths, but all he saw beneath the sagging arch was a wall of darkness. In some strange way he found that more disturbing than any horde of lost souls he might imagine.

Bright morning sunlight flowed in from the broad windows of Baruk's study, and a warm wind slipped into the room carrying the smells and noises from the street below. The alchemist, still dressed in his nightclothes, sat on a high stool at the map table. He held a brush in one hand, dipping it now and again into an ornate silver inkwell.

The red ink had been watered down. He painted wash on the map, covering the areas now held by the Malazan Empire. Fully one half of the map – the north half – was red. A small clear strip just south of Blackdog Forest marked Caladan Brood's forces, flanked on either side by two smaller patches indicating the Crimson Guard. The red wash surrounded these clear spots and extended down to engulf Pale, ending on the north edge of the Tahlyn Mountains.

The street noises had become quite loud, Baruk noted, as he leaned close to the map to paint the red tide's southern border. Construction work, he concluded, hearing the squeal of winches and a voice bellowing at passers-by. The sounds died away, then there came a loud *crack!* Baruk jumped, his right forearm jerking out and knocking over the inkwell. The red ink poured across his map.

Cursing, Baruk sat back. His eyes widened as he watched the spreading stain cover Darujhistan and continue south to Catlin. He stepped down from the stool, reaching for a cloth to wipe his hands, more than a little shaken by what could easily be taken as an omen. He walked across the chamber to the window, bent forward and looked down.

A crew of workers was busy tearing up the street directly below. Two burly men swung picks while three others formed a line passing the shattered cobblestones to a growing pile on the pavement. The foreman stood nearby, his back to a wagon, studying a parchment scroll.

Baruk frowned. 'Who's in charge of road maintenance?' he wondered aloud.

A soft knock diverted his attention. 'Yes?'

His servant, Roald, took a single step into the room. 'One of your agents has arrived, Lord.'

Baruk flicked a glance at the map table. 'Have him wait a moment, Roald.'

'Yes, Lord.' The servant stepped back and closed the door.

The alchemist walked over to the table and rolled up the ruined map. From the hallway came a loud voice followed by a murmur. Baruk slid the map on to a shelf and turned in time to see the agent enter, on his trail a scowling Roald.

Waving at Roald to leave, Baruk gazed down at the gaudily dressed man. 'Good day, Kruppe.'

Roald stepped out and softly shut the door.

'More than good, Baruk, dear friend of Kruppe. Truly wonderful! Have you partaken of the morn's fresh air?'

Baruk glanced at the window. 'Unfortunately,' he said, 'the air outside my window has become rather dusty.'

Kruppe paused. His arms returned to his sides, then he reached into a sleeve and withdrew his handkerchief. He patted his brow. 'Ah, yes, the road workers. Kruppe passed them on his way in. A rather belligerent lot, thinks Kruppe. Indeed, rude, but hardly exceptional for such menial labourers.'

Baruk gestured to a chair.

With a beatific smile Kruppe sat. 'Such a hot day,' he said, eyeing the carafe of wine on the mantelpiece.

Ignoring this, Baruk strode to the window then turned his back to it. He studied the man, wondering if he would ever catch a glimpse of what lay beyond Kruppe's cherubic demeanour. 'What have you heard?' he asked softly.

'What has Kruppe heard? What *hasn't* Kruppe heard!'

Baruk raised an eyebrow. 'How about brevity?'

The man shifted in the chair and mopped his forehead. 'Such heat!' Seeing Baruk's expression harden, he continued, 'Now, as for news.' He leaned

forward, his voice falling to a whisper.' 'Tis muttered in corners in the bars, in dark doorways of dank streets, in the nefarious shadows of nocturnal night, in—'

'Get on with it!'

'Yes, of course. Well, Kruppe has caught wind of a rumour. An assassin's war, no less. The Guild is taking losses, 'tis said.'

Baruk turned back to the window, his eyes on the street below. 'And where do the thieves stand?'

'The rooftops are getting crowded. Throats are being slit. Profits have plummeted.'

'Where's Rallick?'

Kruppe blinked. 'He's disappeared,' he said. 'Kruppe has not seen him in days.'

'This assassin's war, it isn't internal?'

'No.'

'Has this new force been identified, then?'

'No.'

Baruk's gaze intensified. Below, the street workers seemed to spend more time arguing than working. An assassin's war could be trouble. Vorcan's Guild was strong, but the Empire was stronger, if indeed these newcomers were Claws. But something felt decidedly odd about the whole thing. In the past the Empress used such local guilds, often recruited from them. The alchemist could discern no purpose behind such a war, and that was even more disturbing to him than the war itself. Hearing a shuffling behind him, he remembered his agent. He turned and smiled. 'You can go now.'

Something flashed in Kruppe's eyes that startled Baruk. The fat man rose in a single fluid motion. 'Kruppe has more to tell, Master Baruk.'

Bemused, the alchemist nodded for Kruppe to continue.

'The tale is arduous and confused, alas,' he said, striding to join Baruk at the window. His handkerchief had disappeared. 'Kruppe can only surmise as best a man of innumerable talents may. In moments of leisure, during games of chance and the like. In the aura of the Twins an Adept may hear, see, smell, and touch things as insubstantial as the wind. A taste of Lady Luck, the bitter warning of the Lord's Laughter.' Kruppe's gaze snapped to the alchemist. 'Do you follow, Master?'

His eyes riveted on the man's round face, Baruk said quietly, 'You speak of Oponn.'

Kruppe looked back down at the street. 'Perhaps. Perhaps a grim feint meant to mislead such as foolish Kruppe—'

Foolish? Baruk smiled inwardly. Not *this man.*

'- who can say?' Kruppe raised a hand, showing in his palm a flat disc of wax. 'An item,' he said softly, his eyes on the disc, 'that passes without provenance, pursued by many who thirst for its cold kiss, on which life and all that lay within life is often gambled. Alone, a beggar's crown. In great numbers, a king's folly. Weighted with ruin, yet blood washes from it beneath the lightest rain, and to the next no hint of its cost. It is as it is, says Kruppe, worthless but for those who insist otherwise.'

Baruk was holding his breath. His lungs burned, yet it was an effort to release them. Kruppe's words had drawn him into something – a place, hinting of vast stores of knowledge and the sure, unfailing, precise hand that had gathered it, marked it on parchment. A library, shelves of black wood in sharp relief, tomes bound to shiny leather, yellowed scrolls, a pitted, stained desk – Baruk felt he had but stolen a single glance into this chamber. Kruppe's mind, the secret place with its door locked to all but one. 'You speak,' Baruk said slowly, fighting to pull back into reality by focusing on the wax disc in Kruppe's hand, 'of a coin.'

Kruppe's hand snapped shut. He turned and set the disc down on the window-sill. 'Examine this semblance, Master Baruk. It marks both sides of a single coin.' The handkerchief reappeared and Kruppe stepped back, dabbing his brow. 'My, but it is hot, says Kruppe!'

'Help yourself to some wine,' Baruk murmured. As the man left his side the alchemist opened his Warren. He gestured and the wax disc rose into the air, slowly moving to hover before him at eye-level. He studied the imprint facing him. 'The Lady,' he muttered, nodding. The disc turned, revealing to him the Lord. The disc turned again, and Baruk's eyes widened as it began spinning. A whirring sound filled the back of his head. He felt his Warren resisting a pressure that grew with the sound, then his source collapsed.

Faintly, as if from a great distance, he heard Kruppe speak. 'Even in this semblance, Master Baruk, blows the Twins' breath. No mage's Warren can withstand that wind.'

The disc still spun in the air in front of Baruk, a silver blur. A fine mist expanded around it. Hot droplets spattered his face and he stepped back. Blue fire flickered from the melting wax, the disc dwindling rapidly. A moment later it vanished, and the spinning sound and its accompanying pressure stopped abruptly.

The sudden silence filled Baruk's head with pain. He laid a trembling hand on the window-sill for support, then closed his eyes. 'Who carries the Coin, Kruppe?' His voice rasped from his constricted throat. 'Who?'

Kruppe once again stood at his side. 'A lad,' he answered casually. 'Known to Kruppe, assuredly so, as well as to your other agents, Murillio, Rallick and Coll.'

Baruk's eyes reopened. 'That can't be a coincidence,' he hissed, a desperate hope rising to struggle against the terror he felt. Oponn had entered the gambit, and in such reaches of power the life of a city and those within it meant nothing. He glared at Kruppe. 'Gather the group, then. All you've named. They've served my interests for a long time, and they must do so now, above all other concerns. Do you understand me?'

'Kruppe will convey your insistence. Rallick perchance is bound to Guild duties, while Coll, given purpose in life once again, might well steady his gaze and tread and take this mission to heart. Master Baruk? What is the mission, by the way?'

'Protect the Coinbearer. Watch him, mark whose face rests on him benign or foul. I must know if the Lady has him, or the Lord. And, Kruppe, for this, find Rallick. If the Lord claims the Coinbearer, the assassin's talents will be required.'

Kruppe blinked. 'Understood. Alas, may mercy smile upon young Crokus.'

'Crokus?' Baruk frowned. 'That's a name I know.'

Kruppe's face remained blank.

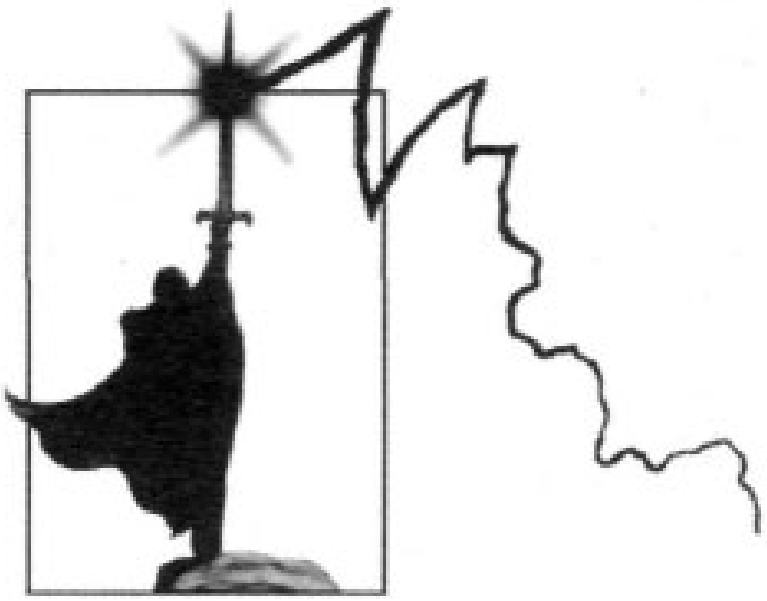
'Never mind. Very well, Kruppe.' He turned back to the window once again. 'Keep me informed.'

'As always, Baruk, Kruppe's friend.' The man bowed. 'And thank you for the wine, it was most delicious.'

Baruk heard the door open then close. He gazed down the street. He'd managed to clamp a hold on his fear. Oponn had a way of making ruins of the most finely wrought plans. Baruk despised that prospect of chance operating in his affairs. He could no longer rely on his ability to predict, to prepare contingencies, to work out every possibility and seek out the one best suited to his desires. *As the Coin spun, thus the city.*

Added to this the mysterious ways of the Empress. Baruk rubbed his brow. He'd have to instruct Roald to bring him some healing tea. His headache was reaching debilitating proportions. As he brought his hand down past his face his eyes caught a flash of red. He raised both palms into view. Red ink stained them. He leaned forward on the window-sill. Through a sparkling cloud of dust, Darujhistan's rooftops sprawled, and the harbour beyond. 'And you, Empress,' he whispered. 'I know you're here, somewhere. Your pawns move unseen as yet, but I will find them. Be sure of that, with or without Oponn's damned luck.'

BOOK THREE



THE MISSION

Marionettes dance afield
beneath masterly hands –
I stumble among them
crossed by the strings
in tangled two-step
and curse all these fools
in their mad pirouette –
I shall not live as they do
oh, no, leave me in my
circled dance –
these unbidden
twitchings you see
I swear on Hood's Grave
is artistry in motion

Sayings of the Fool
Theny Bule (b?)

CHAPTER EIGHT

He stepped down then
among women and men,
the sigil stripped
in her foul cleansing
there on the blood-soaked sand
spilled the lives
of Emperor and First Sword –
so tragic this treachery ...
He was of the Old Guard,
commanding the honed edge
of Empire's fury,
and so in stepping down
but not away
he remained the remembrance
before her eyes, the curse
of conscience she would not stand.
A price was placed before him
that he glanced over in first passing
unknowing and so unprepared
in stepping down among women
and men, he found what
he'd surrendered and damned
its reawakening ...

The Bridgeburners
Toc the Younger

A quarter-hour before dawn the sky held the colour of iron shot through with streaks of rust. Sergeant Whiskeyjack squatted on a dome of bedrock up from the pebble beach, gazing out over the misty calm surface of Lake Azur. Far to the south, on the lake's opposite shore, rose the faint glow of Darujhistan.

The mountain crossing of the night just past had been hell, the Quorl tossed about in the midst of three warring thunder-heads. It was a miracle no one had been lost. The rain had since stopped, leaving the air cool and clammy.

He heard the sound of boots accompanied by a clicking noise behind him. Whiskeyjack turned and straightened. Kalam and a Black Moranth approached, picking their way through the mossy tumble of rocks at the base of the slope. Behind them rose the shadowed redwood forest, the patched trunks standing like bearded sentinels against the mountainside. The sergeant drew a deep breath of the chill morning air.

'Everything's fine,' Kalam said. 'The Green Moranth delivered as ordered, and more. Fiddler and Hedge are two happy sappers.'

Whiskeyjack raised an eyebrow. He turned to the Black Moranth. 'I thought your munitions were getting scarce.'

The creature's face remained in shadow beneath the hinged helmet. The words that came from it seemed born from a cavern, hollow and faintly echoing. 'Selectively, Bird That Steals. You are well known to us, Bridgeburner. You tread the enemy's shadow. From the Moranth, assistance will never be scarce.'

Surprised, Whiskeyjack looked away, the skin tightening around his eyes.

The Moranth continued. 'You asked of the fate of one of our kind. A warrior with but one arm, who fought at your side in the streets of Nathilog many years ago. He lives still.'

The sergeant took a deep breath of the sweet forest air. 'Thank you,' he said.

'We wish that the blood you next find on your hands is your enemy's, Bird That Steals.'

He frowned, then gave a brusque nod and turned his attention back to Kalam.

'What else?'

The assassin's face became expressionless. 'Quick Ben's ready,' he said.

'Good. Gather the others. I'll be laying out my plan.'

'Your plan, Sergeant?'

'Mine,' Whiskeyjack said firmly. 'The one devised by the Empress and her tacticians is being rejected, as of now. We're doing it my way. Get going, Corporal.'

Kalam saluted then left.

Whiskeyjack stepped down from the rock, his boots sinking into the moss. 'Tell me, Moranth, might a squadron of your Black be patrolling this area two weeks from now?'

The Moranth's head swivelled audibly towards the lake. 'Such unscheduled patrols are common. I expect to command one myself in two weeks' time.'

Whiskeyjack gazed steadily at the black-armoured warrior standing beside him. 'I'm not quite sure how to take that,' he said eventually.

The warrior faced him. 'We are not so unalike,' he said. 'In our eyes deeds have measure. We judge. We act upon our judgements. As in Pale, we match spirit with spirit.'

The sergeant frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'Eighteen thousand seven hundred and thirty-nine souls departed in the purge of Pale. One for each Moranth confirmed as a victim of Pale's history of enmity towards us. Spirit with spirit, Bird That Steals.'

Whiskeyjack found he had no response. The Moranth's next words shook him deeply.

'There are worms within your empire's flesh. But such degradation is natural in all bodies. Your people's infection is not yet fatal. It can be scoured clean. The Moranth are skilled at such efforts.'

'How exactly,' Whiskeyjack paused, choosing his words carefully, 'do you intend this scouring?' He recalled the wagons piled with corpses winding

out of Pale, and struggled against the ice tingling along his spine.

'Spirit with spirit,' the Moranth answered, returning his attention to the city on the south shore. 'We depart for now. You will find us here in two weeks' time, Bird That Steals.'

Whiskeyjack watched the Black Moranth walk away, pushing through the thicket surrounding the clearing where his riders waited. A moment later he heard the rapid thud of wings, then the Quorl rose above the trees. The Moranth circled once overhead, then turned north, slipping between the bearded boles and heading upslope.

The sergeant sat down on the bedrock again, his eyes on the ground as the members of his squad arrived, hunkering down around him. He remained silent, seeming unaware that he had company, his brow furrowed and jaw bunching as he ground his molars with a slow, steady precision.

'Sarge?' Fiddler said quietly.

Startled, Whiskeyjack looked up. He drew a deep breath. Everyone had gathered with the exception of Quick Ben. He'd leave Kalam to fill in the wizard later. 'All right. The original plan's been scrapped, since it was intended to get us all killed. I didn't like that part, so we'll do it my way and hopefully get out alive.'

'We ain't going to mine the city gates?' Fiddler asked, glancing at Hedge.

'No,' the sergeant answered. 'We'll put those Moranth munitions to better use. Two objectives, two teams. Kalam will lead one, and with him will be Quick Ben and ...' he hesitated '... and Sorry. I'll lead the other team. The first task is to get into the city unnoticed. Out of uniform.' He looked to Mallet. 'I take it the Green delivered?'

The healer nodded. 'It's a local make, all right. Eighteen-foot fisher, four oars, should get us across the lake easy enough. Even a couple of nets included.'

'So we'll do some fishing,' Whiskeyjack said. 'Coming into the harbour without a catch would look suspect. Anybody here ever fished?'

There was silence, then Sorry spoke up. 'I have, a long time ago.'

Whiskeyjack stared at her, then said, 'Right. Pick whoever you need for that.'

Sorry smiled mockingly.

Whiskeyjack pulled his gaze from hers with an oath under his breath. He eyed his two saboteurs. 'How much munitions?'

'Two crates,' Hedge replied, adjusting his leather cap. 'Cussers all the way down to Smokers.'

'We could cook a palace,' Fiddler added, shifting about excitedly.

'Good enough,' Whiskeyjack said. 'All right, everyone listen and pay attention, or we won't come out of this alive ...'

In a secluded glade in the forest, Quick Ben poured white sand in a circle and sat down in its centre. He took five sharpened sticks and set them in a row before him, pushing them to various depths in the loam. The centre stick, the highest, rose about three feet; the ones on either side stood at two feet and the outer ones at a foot.

The wizard uncoiled a yard's length of thin gut string. He took one end and fashioned a scaled-down noose, which he tightened over the centre stick near the top. He ran the line to the left, looping it once over the next shaft, then crossed over to the right side and looped it again. He brought the string across to the far left stick, muttering a few words as he did so. He wrapped it twice and brought it over to the far right stick, where he tied a knot and cut the trailing string.

Quick Ben leaned back and folded his hands on his lap. A frown creased his brow. 'Hairlock!' An outer stick twitched, turned slightly, then fell still. 'Hairlock!' he barked again. All five shafts jerked. The centre one bent towards the wizard. The string tautened and a low-pitched hum emanated from it.

A cold wind swept across Quick Ben's face, stripping away the beads of sweat that had gathered in the last minute. A rushing sound filled his head, and he felt himself falling through dark caverns, their unseen walls ringing in his ears as if iron hammers clanged against the rock. Flashes of blinding silver light stung his eyes and the wind pulled at the skin and flesh of his face.

In some shielded part of his mind he retained a sense of distance, of control. Within this calm he could think, observe, analyse. 'Hairlock,' he whispered, 'you've gone too far. Too deep. This Warren has swallowed you and will never spit you out. You're losing control, Hairlock.' But these thoughts were for him alone; he knew the puppet was still distant.

He watched himself continue, spinning, whirling through the Caverns of Chaos. Hairlock was compelled to match him, only upward. Abruptly he found himself standing. Beneath his feet the black rock seemed to swirl, cracked here and there in its slow convolutions by bright, glowing red.

Looking around, he saw that he stood on a spar of rock, rising at an angle, its jagged apex a dozen feet in front of him. Turning, his gaze followed the spar as it sank down and out of sight, lost to billowing yellow clouds. A moment of vertigo gripped Quick Ben. He tottered, then, as he regained his balance he heard a chuckle behind him. He turned to see Hairlock perched atop the apex, his wooden body smeared and scorched, the doll's clothing ripped and frayed.

Quick Ben asked, 'This is the Spar of Andii, isn't it?'

Hairlock's round head bobbed. 'Half-way. Now you know how far I have gone, wizard. To the very foot of the Warren, where power finds its first shape, and all is possible.'

'Just not very likely,' Quick Ben said, eyeing the marionette. 'How does it feel, standing in the middle of all that creation but unable to touch it, to use it? It's too alien, isn't it? It bums you with every reach.'

'I'll master it,' Hairlock hissed. 'You know nothing. Nothing.'

Quick Ben smiled. 'I've been here before, Hairlock.' He scanned the swirling gases around them, scudding on contrary winds. 'You've been lucky,' he said. 'Though they are few in number, there are creatures who call this realm home.' He paused and turned his smile on the puppet. 'They dislike intruders – have you seen what they do to them? What they leave behind?' The wizard's smile broadened at seeing Hairlock's involuntary jerk. 'So you have,' he said quietly.

'You are my protector,' Hairlock snapped. 'I'm bound to you, Wizard! The responsibility is yours, nor will I hide the fact if I am taken.'

'Bound to me, indeed.' Quick Ben lowered himself to his haunches. 'Good to hear your memory's come back. Tell me, how fares Tattersail?'

The puppet slumped, looking away. 'Her recovery is a difficult one.'

Quick Ben frowned. 'Recovery? From what?'

'The Hound Gear tracked me.' Hairlock shifted uneasily. 'There was a skirmish.'

A scowl grew on the wizard's face. 'And?'

The puppet shrugged. 'Gear fled, sorely wounded by a mundane sword in the hands of that captain of yours. Tayschrenn then arrived, but Tattersail had slipped into unconsciousness by then, so his search for answers was thwarted. But the fire of suspicion has been stoked beneath him. He sends out his servants, and they stalk the Warrens. They hunt for signs of who and what I am. And why. Tayschrenn knows your squad is involved, he knows you're trying to save your own skins.' The puppet's mad gaze flickered. 'He wants you all dead, Wizard. And as for Tattersail, perhaps he hopes her fever will kill her so he won't have to – but there is much he'd lose if she died without his questioning her first. No doubt he'd seek out her soul, he'd pursue what she knows into Hood's own realm, but she'd know enough to be elusive.'

'Shut up for a minute,' Quick Ben ordered. 'Back to the beginning. You said Captain Paran stabbed Gear with his sword?'

Hairlock scowled. 'I did. A mortal weapon – it shouldn't have been possible. He may well have dealt the Hound a fatal wound.' The puppet paused, then growled, 'You've not told me everything, Wizard. There are gods involved in this. If you keep me in such ignorance I might well stumble into the path of one of them.' He spat. 'A slave to you is bad enough. Do you think you could challenge a god for mastery of me? I'd be taken, turned, perhaps even ...' Hairlock unsheathed one of his small knives '... used against you.' He advanced a step, a dark glitter in his eyes.

Quick Ben raised an eyebrow. Inside, his heart lurched in his chest. Was it possible? Would he not have detected something? A flavour, a hint of immortal presence?

'One last thing, Wizard,' Hairlock murmured, taking another step. 'Tattersail's fever crested just this night past. She screamed something about a coin. A coin that had spun, but now it has fallen, it has bounced, it has entered someone's hand. You must tell me about this coin – I must have your thoughts, Wizard.' The puppet stopped suddenly and looked down at the knife in his hand. Hairlock hesitated, seeming confused, then sheathed the weapon and squatted. 'What's so important about a coin?' he growled. 'Nothing. The bitch raved – she was stronger than I had thought.'

Quick Ben froze. The puppet seemed to have forgotten that the wizard was present. The thoughts he now heard were Hairlock's own. He realized he was looking through the shattered window into the puppet's insane mind. And it was there that all the danger lay. The wizard held his breath as Hairlock continued, its eyes fixed on the clouds below.

'Gear should have killed her – would have, if not for that idiot captain. What irony, he now tends to her and puts his hand to his sword whenever I seek to come near. He knows I would snuff her life in an instant. But that sword. What god plays with this fool noble?' The puppet spoke on, but his words dwindled into inaudible mumbles.

Quick Ben waited, hoping for more, though what he'd already heard was enough to set his heart pounding. This mad creature was unpredictable, and all that held him in check was a tenuous control – the strings of power he'd attached to Hairlock's wooden body. But with this kind of madness came

strength – enough strength to break those strings? The wizard was no longer as sure of his control as he had been.

Hairlock had fallen silent. His painted eyes still flickered with black flame – the leaking of Chaotic power. Quick Ben took a step forward.

'Pursue Tayschrenn's plans,' he commanded, then he kicked hard. The toe of his boot struck Hairlock's chest and sent the puppet spinning. Hairlock flew out over the edge, then fell downward. His outraged snarl dwindled as he disappeared into the yellow clouds.

Quick Ben drew a deep breath of the thick, stale air. He hoped that his abrupt dismissal had been enough to skew Hairlock's recollections of the past few minutes. Still, he felt those strings of control growing ever more taut. The more this Warren twisted Hairlock, the more power he would command.

The wizard knew what he'd have to do – Hairlock had given it to him, in fact. Still, Quick Ben wasn't looking forward to it. The taste of sour bile rose into his mouth and he spat over the ledge. The air stank of sweat and it was a moment before he realized it was his own. He hissed a curse. 'Time to leave,' he muttered. He raised his arms.

The wind returned with a roar, and he felt his body flung up, up into the cavern above, then the next. As the caverns blurred by, a single word clung to his thoughts, a word that seemed to twist around the problem of Hairlock like a web.

Quick Ben smiled, but it was a smile responding to terror. And the word remained, *Gear,* and with that name the wizard's terror found a face.

Whiskeyjack rose amid silence. The expressions arrayed around him were sober, eyes downcast or fixed elsewhere, closed into some personal, private place where swam the heaviest thoughts. The lone exception was Sorry, who stared at the sergeant with bright, approving eyes. Whiskeyjack wondered who was doing the approving within those eyes – then he shook

his head, angry that something of Quick Ben and Kalam's suspicions had slipped into his thoughts.

He glanced away, to see Quick Ben approaching. The wizard looked tired, an ashen tint to his face. Whiskeyjack's gaze snapped to Kalam.

The assassin nodded. 'Everyone, look alive,' he said. 'Load up the boat and get it ready.'

Mallet leading the way, the others headed down to the beach.

Waiting for Quick Ben to arrive, Kalam said, 'The squad looks beat, Sergeant. Fiddler, Trotts and Hedge moved enough dirt in those tunnels to bury the Empire's dead. I'm worried about them. Mallet – he seems to be holding together, so far ... Still, whatever Sorry knows about fishing, I doubt any one of us could row their way out of a bathtub. And we're about to try crossing a lake damn near big as a sea?'

Whiskeyjack's jaw tightened, then he forced a casual shrug into his shoulders. 'You know damn well that any Warren opening anywhere near the city will likely be detected. No choice, Corporal. We row. Unless we can rig up a sail.'

Kalam grunted. 'Since when does the girl know about fishing?'

The sergeant sighed. 'I know. Came out of nowhere, didn't it?'

'Bloody convenient.'

Quick Ben reached the dome of rock. Both men fell silent at seeing his expression.

'I'm about to propose something you're going to hate,' the wizard said.

'Let's hear it,' Whiskeyjack replied, in a voice empty of feeling.

Ten minutes later the three men arrived on the slick pebbled beach, both Whiskeyjack and Kalam looking shaken. A dozen yards from the water's edge sat the fisher boat. Trotts was straining on the rope attached to the prow hook, gasping and moaning as he leaned forward with all his weight.

The rest of the squad stood in a clump off to one side, quietly discussing Trotts' futile efforts. Fiddler chanced to look up. Seeing Whiskeyjack marching towards them, he blanched.

'Trotts!' the sergeant bellowed.

The Barghast's face, woad tattoos stretched into illegibility, turned to Whiskeyjack with wide eyes.

'Let go of the rope, soldier.'

Kalam released an amused snort behind Whiskeyjack, who glared at the others. 'Now,' he said, his voice harsh, 'since one of you idiots convinced everyone else that loading all the equipment into the boat when it's still on shore was a good idea, you can all man the rope and drag it into the lake – not you, Trotts. You get inside, get comfortable, there at the stern.' Whiskeyjack paused. He studied Sorry's expressionless face. 'From Fiddler and Hedge I expect this, but I thought I put you in charge of setting things up.'

Sorry shrugged.

Whiskeyjack sighed. 'Can you rig us a sail?'

'There's no wind.'

'Well, maybe there will be!' Whiskeyjack said, exasperated.

'Yes,' Sorry answered. 'We have some canvas. We'll need a mast.'

'Take Fiddler and make one. Now, the rest of you, get this boat into the water.'

Trotts climbed inside and sat down at the stern. He stretched out his long legs and draped an arm over the splashboard. He bared his filed teeth in what might have been a smile.

Whiskeyjack turned to a grinning Kalam and Quick Ben. 'Well?' he demanded. 'What're you waiting for?'

The grins died.

CHAPTER NINE

Have you seen the one
who stands apart
cursed in a ritual
sealing his kind
beyond death the host
amassed and whirling
like a plague of pollen –
he stands apart
the First among all
ever veiled in time
yet outcast and alone
a T'lan Imass wandering
like a seed unfallen

Lay of Onos T'oolan
Toc the Younger

Toc the Younger leaned forward in his saddle and spat. It was his third day out from Pale, and he longed for the city's high walls around him. The Rhivi Plain stretched out on all sides, cloaked in yellow grass that rippled in the afternoon wind, but otherwise featureless.

He scratched the edges of the wound that had taken his left eye, and muttered under his breath. Something was wrong. He should have met her two days past. Nothing was going as planned these days. What with Captain Paran vanishing before even meeting Whiskeyjack and the story making the rounds about a Hound attacking the 2nd's last-surviving mage and leaving fourteen dead marines in its wake, he supposed he shouldn't be surprised that this rendezvous had gone awry as well.

Chaos seemed a sign of the times. Toc straightened and rose in his saddle. Though there was no true road as such on the Plain, merchant caravans had mapped a rough track running north-south along the western edge. Trade had since died out, but the passing of generations of wagons and horse trains had left its mark. The centre of the Plain was home to the Rhivi, those small brown-skinned people who moved with the herds in a seasonal cycle. Though not warlike, the Malazan Empire had forced their hand, and now they fought and scouted alongside Caladan Brood's Tiste Andii legions against the Empire.

Moranth reports placed the Rhivi far to the north and east, and Toc was thankful for that. He was feeling very alone out in this wasteland, yet loneliness was a lesser evil, all things considered.

Toc's single eye widened. It seemed he wasn't so alone, after all. Perhaps a league ahead ravens wheeled. The man cursed and loosened the scimitar sheathed at his hip. He fought the urge to push his horse into a gallop and settled for a quick trot.

As he neared he saw trampled grass off to one side of the trader's track. The cackling laughter of the ravens was the only sound to break the stillness. They had already begun feeding. Toc reined in his horse and sat unmoving in his saddle, hunched forward. None of the bodies he saw looked as if they were apt to start moving, and the ravens' preoccupied squabbling was good evidence that any survivors had long gone. Still, he had a bad feeling about this. Something hung in the air, something between a smell and a taste.

He waited, for what he wasn't certain, but a reluctance to move gripped him. All at once he identified the strangeness he felt: magic. It had been unleashed here. 'I hate this,' he muttered, then dismounted.

The ravens gave him room, but not much. Ignoring their outraged shrieks he approached the bodies. They numbered twelve in all. Eight wore the uniforms of Malazan Marines – but these weren't average soldiers. His gaze narrowed on the silver sigils on their helmets. 'Jakatakan,' he said. Elites. They'd been cut to pieces.

He turned his attention to the remaining bodies and felt a tremor of fear run through him. No wonder the Jakatakan had taken such a beating. Toc strode to one of the bodies and crouched beside it. He knew something of the clan markings among the Barghast, how each hunter group was identified through their woad tattooing. The breath hissed between his teeth and he reached out to turn the savage's face towards him, then he nodded. These were Ilgres Clan. Before the Crimson Guard had enlisted them, their home territory had been fifteen hundred leagues to the east, among the mountains just south of the Porule. Slowly Toc rose. The Ilgres numbered among the strongest of those who had joined the Crimson Guard at Blackdog Forest, but that was four hundred leagues north. So what had brought them here?

The stench of spilled magic wafted across his face and he turned, his eye fixing on a body he hadn't noticed before. It lay beside scorched grass. 'So,' he said, 'my question's answered.' This band had been led by a Barghast shaman. Somehow, they'd stumbled on to a trail and this shaman had recognized it for what it was. Toc studied the shaman's body. Killed by a sword wound in the throat. The unleashing of sorcery had been the shaman's, but no magic had opposed him. And that was odd, particularly since it was the shaman who had died, rather than whomever he'd attacked.

Toc grunted. 'Well, she's said to be hell on mages.' He walked a slow circle around the kill site, and found the trail with little difficulty. Some of the Jakatakan had survived, and from the smaller set of boot-prints, so had their charge. And overlaying these tracks were half a dozen moccasin prints. The trail veered westerly from the trader's track, yet still led south.

Returning to his horse, Toc mounted and swung the animal around. He removed the short bow from its saddle holster and strung it, then nocked an arrow. There was no hope of coming up on the Barghast undetected. Out on this plain he'd be visible a long time before entering arrow-range – and that range had become much closer now that he'd lost an eye. So they'd be waiting for him, with those damn lances. But he knew he had no choice; he hoped only to take down one or two of them before they skewered him.

Toc spat again, then wrapped the reins around his left forearm and adjusted his grip on the bow. He gave the wide red scar crossing his face a vigorous, painful scratch, realizing that the maddening itch would return in moments anyway. 'Oh well,' he said, then drove his heels into the horse's flanks.

The lone hill that rose up before Adjunct Lorn was not a natural one. The tops of mostly buried stones encircled its base. She wondered what might be entombed within it, then dismissed her misgivings. If those standing stones were of the size she'd seen rising around the mysterious barrows outside Genabaris, this mound dated back millennia. She turned to the two exhausted marines stumbling in her wake. 'We'll make our stand here. You with the crossbow, I want you lying up top.'

The man ducked his head in answer and staggered to the mound's grassy summit. Both he and his comrade seemed almost relieved that she'd called a halt, though they knew their death was but minutes away.

Lorn eyed the other soldier. He'd taken a lance barb in his left shoulder and the blood still flowed profusely down the front of his breastplate. How he had stayed on his feet in the last hour was beyond Lorn's understanding. He looked upon her with eyes dulled by resignation, showing nothing of the pain he must be feeling.

'I'll hold your left,' he said, shifting his grip on the curved tulwar in his right hand.

Lorn unsheathed her own longsword and fixed her attention northwards. Only four of the six Barghast were visible, approaching slowly. 'We're being flanked,' she called out to her crossbowman. 'Take the one on your left.'

The soldier beside her grunted. 'My life need not be sheltered,' he said. 'We were charged with your protection, Adjunct—'

'Quiet,' Lorn commanded. 'The longer you stand the better protected I'll be,' she said.

The soldier grunted again.

The four Barghast were lingering now, just out of bowshot range. Two still carried their lances; the other two gripped short axes. Then a voice cried out far to Lorn's right and she whirled to see a lance speeding towards her, and behind it a charging Barghast.

Lorn brought her blade across her body and dropped into a crouch as she raised the weapon over her head. Her sword caught the lance's shaft and even as it did so she was turning, pulling her weapon to one side. The deflected lance sped past and cracked into the hillside off to her right.

Behind her she heard the crossbowman release a quarrel. As she spun back to the four charging Barghast there came a scream of pain from the other side of the mound. The soldier beside her seemed to have forgotten his wound, as he gripped his tulwar with both hands and planted his feet wide.

'Attend, Adjunct,' he said.

The Barghast off to the right cried out and she turned to see him spinning with the impact of a quarrel.

The four warriors before them were no more than thirty feet away. The two with lances now launched them. Lorn made no move, realizing almost immediately that the one aimed at her would fly wide. The soldier beside her dropped away to his left, but not enough to avoid the lance as it thudded into his right thigh. It struck with such force as to drive right through his leg and embed itself in the earth. The soldier was pinned, but his only response was a soft gasp, and he raised his sword to parry an axe swinging at his head.

In this time Lorn had already closed with the Barghast rushing at her. His axe was a shorter weapon, and she took advantage of this with a thrust before he came into his own range. He brought the copper-sheathed haft up to parry, but Lorn had already flicked her wrist, completing the feint and dipping under the axe. Her lunge buried the sword point in the Barghast's chest, slicing the leather armour as if it were cloth.

Her attack had committed her, and her sword was nearly wrenched from her hand as the savage toppled backwards. Off-balance, she staggered a

step, expecting the crushing blow of an axe. But it did not arrive. Regaining her balance she spun round, to find her crossbowman, now wielding his tulwar, engaging the other Barghast. Lorn snapped her attention to see how her other guard fared.

Somehow, he still lived, though he faced two Barghast. He'd managed to drag the lance out of the earth, but the weapon's shaft remained in his leg. That he was able to move at all, much less defend himself, spoke eloquently of Jakatakan discipline and training.

Lorn rushed to engage the Barghast on the man's right, nearest her. Even as she did so, an axe slipped past the soldier's guard and struck him across the chest. Scale snapped as the heavy weapon's edge ripped through armour. The soldier groaned and fell to one knee, blood spraying on to the ground.

Lorn was in no position to defend him and could only watch in horror as the axe swung again, this time striking the man in the head. The helmet collapsed inward and his neck broke. He toppled sideways, landing at Lorn's feet. Her forward momentum carried her right over him.

A curse broke from her lips as she sprawled, crashing into the Barghast in front of her. She tried to bring the point of her sword up behind him but he twisted lithely to one side and leaped away. Lorn took a wild swing at him, missing, even as she fell. She felt her shoulder dislocate as she hit the hard ground, and the sword dropped from her numbed hand.

Now, she thought, the only thing left to do is die. She rolled on to her back.

With a growl the Barghast was standing beside her, axe raised high.

Lorn was in a good position to see the skeletal hand bursting from the earth beneath the Barghast. It grasped an ankle. Bones snapped and the warrior screamed. Vaguely, as she watched, she wondered where the other two savages had gone. All sounds of fighting seemed to have stopped, but the ground rumbled with a growing, urgent thunder.

The Barghast stared down at the hand crushing his shin. He screamed again as the wide, rippled blade of a flint sword shot up between his legs.

The axe left the warrior's hands as he frantically brought them down in an effort to deflect the sword, twisting to one side and kicking out with his free leg. It all came too late. The sword impaled him, jamming against his hipbone and lifting him from the ground. His dying shriek rose skyward.

Lorn climbed to her feet with difficulty, her right arm hanging useless at her side. She identified the thundering sound as the beat of hoofs, and turned in the direction from which they came. A Malazan. As that fact sank in, she swung her attention from the rider and looked around. Both her guards were dead, and arrows jutted from two Barghast bodies.

She took a shallow breath – all she could manage as pain spread across her chest – and gazed upon the creature that had risen from the earth. It was cloaked in rotting furs, and it stood over the warrior's body, one leg still clutched in its hand. The other hand gripped the sword, which had been pushed the length of the Barghast's body, the point emerging from his neck.

'I was expecting you days ago,' Lorn said, glaring at the figure.

It turned to regard her, its face hidden in shadow beneath the yellowed bone shelf of its helmet. The helmet, she saw, was the skull-cap of some horned beast, one horn broken off at its base.

The rider arrived behind her. 'Adjunct!' he called out, dismounting. He came to her side, bow still in his hand and arrow nocked. His lone eye glanced across Lorn and, seeming satisfied that her wound was not mortal, fixed on the massive but squat creature facing them. 'Hood's Breath, a T'lan Imass.'

Lorn continued glaring at the T'lan Imass. 'I knew you were about. It's the only thing that explains a Barghast shaman bringing himself and his hand-picked hunters into the area. He must have used a Warren to get here. So where *were* you?'

Toc the Younger stared at the Adjunct, amazed at her outburst. His gaze flicked back to the T'lan Imass. The last time he'd seen one was in Seven Cities, eight years past, and then it had been from a distance as the undead legions marched out into the western wastelands on some mission even the Empress could learn nothing about. At this close range, Toc eagerly studied

the T'lan Imass. Not much left of it, he concluded. Despite the sorcery, three hundred thousand years had taken their toll. The skin that stretched across the squat man's robust bones was a shiny nut brown in colour, the texture of leather. Whatever flesh it had once covered had contracted to thin strips the consistency of oak roots – such muscles showed through torn patches here and there. The creature's face, what Toc could see of it, bore a heavy chinless jawbone, high cheeks and a pronounced brow ridge. The eye sockets were dark holes.

'I asked you a question,' Lorn grated. 'Where were you?'

The head creaked as the Imass looked down at its feet. 'Exploring,' it said quietly in a voice born of stones and dust.

Lorn demanded, 'Your name, T'lan?'

'Onos T'oolan, once of the Tarad Clan, of the Logros T'lan. I was birthed in the autumn of the Bleak Year, the ninth son to the Clan whetted as warrior in the Sixth Jaghut War—'

'Enough,' Lorn said. She sagged wearily and Toc moved to her side. Glancing up at him she scowled, 'You look grim.' Then a small smile came to her lips. 'But good to me.'

Toc grinned. 'First things first, Adjunct. A place for you to rest.' She did not protest as he guided her to a grassy knoll near the barrow and gently pushed her to her knees. He glanced back to see the T'lan Imass still standing where it had first emerged from the ground. It had turned, however, and seemed to be studying the barrow. 'We must make your arm immobile,' Toc said to the worn, weathered woman kneeling before him. 'I am named Toc the Younger,' he said, squatting down.

She raised her gaze at this. 'I knew your father,' she said. Her smile returned. 'Also a great bowman.'

He ducked his head in reply.

'He was a fine commander too,' Lorn continued, studying the ravaged youth who was now tending to her arm. 'The Empress has regretted his death—'

'Not dead for sure,' Toc interrupted, his tone tight and his single eye averted as he began removing the gauntlet from her hand. 'Disappeared.'

'Yes,' Lorn said softly. 'Disappeared since the Emperor's death.' She winced as he pulled away the gauntlet and tossed it aside.

'I'll need some strips of cloth,' he said, rising.

Lorn watched him stride to one of the Barghast bodies. She had not known who her Claw contact would be, only that he was the last left alive among Dujek's forces. She wondered why he had veered so sharply from his father's path. There was nothing pleasant, or proud, in being a Claw. Only efficiency and fear.

He took a knife to the body's tanned leather armour, slicing it back to reveal a rough woollen shirt, into which he cut. Then he returned to her side, a handful of long strips in one hand. 'I didn't know you had an Imass for company,' he said, as he crouched beside her again.

'They choose their own modes of travel,' Lorn said, a hint of anger in her voice. 'And come when they please. But yes, he's an integral player in my mission.' She fell silent, gritting her teeth in pain as Toc slipped the rude sling over her shoulder and under her arm.

'I have little good to report,' Toc said, and he told her of Paran's disappearance, and of Whiskeyjack and his squad departing without the captain in attendance. By the time he had finished he had adjusted the sling to his own satisfaction, and sat back on his haunches with a sigh.

'Damn,' Lorn hissed. 'Help me to my feet.'

After he'd done so, she wobbled a bit and gripped his shoulder to steady herself. Then she nodded. 'Get me my sword.'

Toc strode to the spot she'd indicated. After a brief search he found the longsword in the grass, and his eye thinned to a slit upon seeing the weapon's dusty red blade. He brought it to her, and said, 'An Otataral sword, Adjunct, the ore that kills magic'

'And mages,' Lorn said, taking the weapon awkwardly in her left hand and sheathing it.

'I came upon the dead shaman,' Toc said.

'Well,' Lorn said, 'Otataral is no mystery to you of the Seven Cities, but few here know it, and I would keep it that way.'

'Understood.' Toc turned to regard the immobile Imass.

Lorn seemed to read his thought. 'Otataral cannot quench their magic – believe me, it's been tried. The Warrens of the Imass are similar to those of the Jaghut and the Forkrul Assail – Elder-, blood- and earthbound – that flint sword of his will never break, and it cuts through the finest iron as easily as it will flesh and bone.'

Toc shivered and spat. 'I'll not envy you your company, Adjunct.'

Lorn smiled. 'You'll be sharing it for the next few days, Toe the Younger. We've a long walk to Pale.'

'Six, seven days,' Toe said. 'I expected you to be mounted.'

Lorn's sigh was heartfelt. 'The Barghast shaman worked his talents on them. A disease took them all, even my stallion, which I brought with me through the Warren.' Her lined face softened momentarily, and Toc could feel her genuine sorrow.

It surprised him. All that he'd heard of the Adjunct had painted for him a picture of a cold-blooded monster, the gauntleted hand of death that could descend from anywhere at any time. Perhaps this side of her existed; he hoped he would not have to see it. Then again, he corrected himself, she'd not spared her soldiers a second glance. Toc spoke, 'You'll ride my mare, Adjunct. She's no warhorse, but she's quick and long on endurance.'

They walked to where he'd left his horse, and Lorn smiled. 'That's a Wickan breed, Toc the Younger,' she said, as she laid a hand on the mare's neck, 'so cease the modesty, else I lose trust in you. A fine animal.'

Toc helped her into the saddle. 'Do we leave the Imass where it is?' he asked.

Lorn nodded. 'He'll find his own way. Now, let's give this mare the opportunity to prove herself. Wickan blood is said to smell of iron.' She reached down and offered her left arm. 'Mount up,' she said.

Toc barely managed to hide his shock. Share the saddle with the Adjunct of the Empire? The notion was so absurd that he came near to laughing. 'I can walk, Adjunct,' he said gruffly. 'With such little time to waste, you would be better to ride on, and ride hard. You'll see Pale's walls in three days. I can manage a jog at ten-hour stretches.'

'No, Toc the Younger.' Lorn's tone brooked no argument. 'I need you in Pale, and I need to hear all there is about the occupying legions, and Dujek, and Tayschrenn. Better to arrive a few days late than unprepared. Now, grasp my arm and let's be on with it.'

Toc complied.

As he sank into the saddle behind Lorn, his mare snorted and stepped quickly to one side. Both he and the Adjunct almost fell. They turned to see the T'lan Imass standing beside them. It raised its head to Lorn.

'The barrow has yielded a truth, Adjunct,' Onos T'oolan said.

Toc felt her stiffen. 'And that is?'

'We are upon the right path,' the T'lan Imass replied.

Something told Toc that the path the creature referred to had nothing to do with the trader's track leading south to Pale. He cast one final glance back at the barrow as Lorn silently swung the horse around, and then at Onos T'oolan. Neither seemed likely to unveil their secrets, but Lorn's reaction had raised the hairs on the back of his neck, and the itch around his lost eye roused itself. Toc muttered a curse under his breath and began to scratch.

'Something the matter, Toc the Younger?' Lorn asked, not turning.

He thought about his reply. He said, 'The price of being blind, Adjunct. Nothing more.'

Captain Paran paced in the natrow room. This was madness! All he knew was that he was being hidden, but the only answers to his questions would come from a bed-ridden sorceress locked in some strange fever, and a nasty puppet whose painted eyes seemed to fix on him with intense hatred.

Vague memories haunted him as well, the feel of slick, cold stones scraping beneath his fingernails at a moment when all his strength had poured from his body; and then the hazy vision of a massive dog – a Hound? – in the room, a dog that seemed to breathe death. It had been seeking to kill the woman, and he'd stopped it – somehow, he wasn't sure of the details.

A suspicion nagged him that the dog wasn't dead, that it would be back. The puppet ignored most of his questions, and when it did speak to him it was to voice dire threats. Apparently, though the Sorceress was ill, her presence alone – her continued existence – was all that kept Hairlock from fulfilling those threats.

Where was Whiskeyjack? Had the sergeant left without him? What would that do to Adjunct Lorn's plan?

He ceased pacing and turned a glare on the sorceress lying in the bed. Hairlock had told Paran that she'd somehow hidden him when Tayschrenn arrived, the High Mage having sensed the dog's presence. Paran had no memory of any of that, but he wondered how the woman could have managed anything after the beating she'd taken. Hairlock had scoffed that the sorceress hadn't even been aware of opening her Warren that one last time; that she'd done it all on instinct. Paran had the feeling that the marionette had been scared by that unveiling of power. Hairlock seemed most eager for the woman's death, but was either unable to achieve it himself or too frightened to try. The creature had muttered something about wards she'd raised about her person.

Yet Paran found nothing to impede his ministrations when the fever had been at its worst. It had broken the previous night, and now Paran felt his impatience reaching some kind of threshold. The sorceress slept, but if she didn't awaken soon he'd take matters into his own hands – leave this hiding

place, perhaps seek out Toc the Younger, provided he could avoid Tayschrenn or any officers on his way out of the building.

Paran's unseeing glare remained fixed on the sorceress, his thoughts racing. Slowly, a new awareness tickled the edges of his mind, and he abruptly blinked. The woman's eyes were open, and they studied him.

He took a half-step forward but was stopped dead by her first words.

'I heard the Coin drop, Captain.'

The blood drained from Paran's face. An echo flittered through his memory. 'A coin?' he asked, his voice barely a whisper. 'A spinning coin?' *The voices of gods, of dead men and women. Howls of Hounds — all pieces of my memory's torn tapestry.*

'Spins no longer,' the woman replied. She pushed herself into a sitting position. 'How much do you remember?'

'Scant,' the captain admitted, surprised at himself for telling the truth. 'The puppet will not even tell me your name,' he said.

'Tattersail. I've been, uh, in the company of Whiskeyjack and his squad.' A veil of caution seemed to slip over her sleepy gaze. 'I was to take care of you until your health returned.'

'I believe you did,' Paran said. 'And I returned the favour, which evens the scales, Sorceress.'

'So it does. Well, now what?'

Paran's eyes widened. 'You don't know?'

Tattersail shrugged.

'But this is ridiculous,' Paran exclaimed. 'I know nothing of what's happening here. I awaken to find a half-dead witch and a talking puppet for company, and of my new command not a single sign. Have they left for Darujhistan already?'

'I can't give you much in the way of answers,' Tattersail murmured. 'All I can tell you is the sergeant wanted you alive, because he needs to know

who tried to assassinate you. We'd all like to know, in fact.' She fell silent, expectant.

Paran studied her round, ghostly pale face. There was something about her that seemed to disregard her physical mundanity, overwhelmed it, in fact, so that the captain found himself responding in ways that surprised him. It was, he saw, a friendly face, and he couldn't recall the last time he'd experienced such a thing. It left him off-balance, with only Tattersail to steady him. And that made him feel as if he were descending a spiral, with the sorceress in the centre. Descending? Perhaps it was an ascent. He wasn't sure, and the uncertainty made him wary.

'I recall nothing of it,' he said. And that wasn't entirely a lie, though it felt like it with her heavy-lidded eyes steady upon him.

'I think,' Paran added, despite his misgivings, 'there were two of them. I recall a conversation, though I was dead. I think.'

'But you heard a spinning coin,' Tattersail said.

'Yes,' he answered, bewildered. *And more ...* I *went to a place – yellow, infernal light, a chorus of moans, a death's head...*

Tattersail nodded to herself as if confirming a suspicion. 'A god intervened, Captain Paran. Returned the life to you. You might think it was on your behalf, but I'm afraid there wasn't any altruism involved. Are you following me?'

'I'm being used,' Paran stated flatly.

She raised an eyebrow. 'That doesn't bother you?'

Paran shrugged and turned away. 'It's nothing new,' he muttered.

'I see,' she said quietly. 'So Whiskeyjack was right, then. You're not just some new captain, you're something a lot more.'

'That's my concern,' Paran snapped, still avoiding her gaze. Then he faced her, his expression dark. 'And what's your role in all this? You took care of me. Why? Serving your god, are you?'

Tattersail barked a laugh. 'Not likely. Nor did I do much for you in any case. Oponn took care of that.'

Paran stiffened. 'Oponn?' *The* Twins, *sister and brother, the Twins of Chance. He who pushes, she who pulls. Have they been in my dreams? Voices, mention of my ... sword.* He was still for a moment, then he strode over to the dresser. On it lay his sheathed sword. He laid a hand on the grip. 'I purchased this sword three years ago, though its first use came just a few nights past – against the dog.'

'You recall that?'

Something in Tattersail's voice brought him around. In her eyes he now saw fear. She made no attempt to hide it. He nodded. 'Yet I named the weapon the day I bought it.'

'The name?'

Paran's grin was ghastly. 'Chance.'

'The pattern has been long in the weaving,' Tattersail said, closing her eyes and sighing. 'Though I suspect even Oponn could not have imagined your blade tasting its first blood on a Hound of Shadow.'

Paran closed his eyes, then he sighed. 'The dog was a Hound.'

She looked at him and nodded. 'You've met Hairlock?'

'I have.'

'Beware him,' Tattersail said. 'It was his unleashing of a Warren of Chaos that left me fevered. If Warrens are indeed structured, then Hairlock's is diametrically opposed to mine. He's mad, Captain, and he vowed to kill you.'

Paran strapped on his sword. 'What's his role in all of this?'

'I'm not sure,' Tattersail said.

That sounded like a lie, but Paran let it pass. 'He was coming in nightly to check on your progress,' he said. 'But I haven't seen him the past two nights.'

'How many days have I been out?'

'Six, I think. I'm no more certain of time's passage than you are, I'm afraid.' He strode to the door. 'All I know is, I can't just hide here for ever.'

'Wait!'

Paran smiled. 'Very well.' He faced her again. 'Tell me why shouldn't I leave?'

The sorceress hesitated, then spoke. 'I still need you here,' she said.

'Why?'

'It's not me that Hairlock's afraid of,' she answered, seeming to find the words difficult. 'It's you – your sword – that's kept me alive. He saw what you managed to do to the Hound.'

'Damn,' he hissed. Though essentially still a stranger to him, she'd reached through to him with her admission. He tried to fight the compassion welling up inside him. He told himself that his mission overrode all other concerns, that he'd repaid his debt to her, if ever there was one, that she hadn't given him all the reasons he suspected existed for his staying hidden, meaning she didn't trust him – he told himself all these things, but none of it was enough.

'If you go,' she said, 'Hairlock will kill me.'

'What of the wards about you?' he demanded, almost desperately. 'Hairlock said you've wards about you.'

Tattersail's smile was drawn. 'You think he'd just come right out and tell you how dangerous you really are? Wards?' She laughed. 'I've barely the strength to sit straight. If I attempted to open my Warren in this state the power would consume me, burn me to ashes. Hairlock wants you kept in the dark – about everything. The puppet lied.'

Even this rang like a half-truth in Paran's ears. But there was enough there that made sense, that gave reason to Hairlock's hatred of him, and the puppet's obvious fear. The greater deceit would come from Hairlock, not Tattersail, or so he believed, though there was little to support that belief – only ... at least Tattersail was human. He sighed. 'Sooner or later,' he said,

un-clipping his sword belt and returning it to the dresser, 'you and I will have to cut past all this misleading game-playing. Oponn or no, we've a common enemy.'

Tattersail sighed. 'Thank you. Captain Paran?'

He eyed her warily. 'What?'

She smiled. 'It is good to meet you.'

He scowled. She was at it again.

'This seems an unhappy army,' Lorn said, as they waited outside Pale's north gate. One of the guards had entered the city in search of another horse, while the remaining three stood muttering a short distance away.

Toc the Younger had dismounted. He moved close to his horse and said, 'It is, Adjunct. Very unhappy. Along with the dismantling of the Second and Sixth Armies came a shuffling of commands. Nobody's where they were before, right down to the greenest recruit. Squads split up everywhere. And now there's the rumour that the Bridgeburners are going to be retired.' He glanced over at the three marines, saw their hard eyes on him and the Adjunct. 'People around here don't like that,' he said quietly.

Lorn leaned back in her saddle. The pain in her shoulder had become a steady throb, and she was glad the journey was done – at least for the time being. They'd seen nothing of the T'lan Imass since the barrow, though she often sensed his presence, in the dusty wind, beneath the plain's cracked pan. While in the company of Toc the Younger she'd sensed the restless anger churning among the Malazan forces on this continent.

In Pale, ten thousand soldiers crowded the edge of revolt, the spies among them brutally removed, awaiting only High Fist Dujek's word. And the High Mage Tayschrenn wasn't easing the situation by openly countermanding Dujek's instructions to his officers. Yet what troubled the Adjunct the most was this vague tale of a Hound of Shadow doing battle with the 2nd's last cadre mage – there was a mystery there, and she

suspected it was vital. The rest could be dealt with, provided she took charge.

The Adjunct was eager for her meeting with Tayschrenn and this sorceress Tattersail – the name was familiar, tugging at memories that seemed born in her childhood. And around such evasive hints rustled a cloak of fear. But she was determined to deal with that when the time came.

The gate swung open. She looked up to see the marine with a warhorse, and they had company. Toc the Younger snapped a salute, the energy behind it making Lorn wonder at his loyalty. The Adjunct dismounted slowly, then nodded at High Fist Dujek.

The man seemed to have aged a dozen years since she'd last seen him, thirteen months ago in Genabaris. A small smile came to Lorn's mouth as the scene emerged in her mind: the High Fist a worn, weary one-armed man, the Empress's Adjunct, her sword arm in a sling, and Toc the Younger, last representative of the Claw on Genabackis, one-eyed and half his face scarred by fire. Here they were, representatives of three of the four Empire powers on the continent, and they all looked like hell.

Misreading her smile, Dujek grinned. 'Good to see you, too, Adjunct. I was overseeing the resupply when this guard brought word of your arrival.' His gaze grew thoughtful as he studied her, the grin fading. 'I'll find you a Denul healer, Adjunct.'

'Sorcery doesn't work on me, High Fist. It hasn't in a long time. A mundane healer is sufficient.' Her gaze narrowed on Dujek. 'Assuming I'll have no need to unsheath my sword within the walls of Pale.'

'I make no guarantees, Adjunct,' Dujek said casually. 'Come, let us walk.'

Lorn turned to Toc the Younger. 'Thank you for the escort, soldier.'

Dujek laughed, his eyes bright on Toc. 'Unnecessary, Adjunct. I know who, and what, Toc the Younger is – as does virtually everyone else. If he's as good a Claw as he is a soldier, you'd do well to keep him alive.'

'Meaning?'

Dujek gestured that they walk. 'Meaning that his reputation as a soldier of the Second is the only thing preventing a knife across the throat. Meaning get him out of Pale.'

The Adjunct eyed Toc. 'I will see you later,' she said.

Joining Dujek, who had passed beneath the gate's massive arch, Lorn matched his pace as they entered the city. Soldiers crowded the streets, directing merchant wagons and the mobs of citizenry. Evidence of the rain of death still scarred many of the buildings, but labourers had been set to work under the direction of marines.

'The nobility are about to be culled,' Dujek said at her side. 'Tayschrenn wants it to be thorough, and public.'

'Empire policy,' Lorn replied stiffly. 'You're well aware of that, High Fist.'

Dujek glared at her. 'Nine out of ten nobles to hang, Adjunct? Children included?'

Lorn stared at him. 'That seems excessive.'

Dujek was silent for a time, leading her down the main avenue then heading uphill towards the Empire headquarters. Many faces turned to regard them stonily as they passed. It seemed Dujek's identity was known among Pale's citizens. Lorn tried to sense the atmosphere his presence created, but couldn't be certain if it was fear or respect, or both.

'My mission,' Lorn said, as they approached a three-storey stone building, its entrance blocked by a dozen watchful marines, 'will take me out of the city soon—'

'I don't want any details, Adjunct,' Dujek cut in. 'You do what you have to do and just stay out of my way.'

His tone was unthreatening, almost pleasant, but Lorn felt her muscles tense. This man was being pushed, and Tayschrenn was doing the pushing. What was the High Mage up to? The whole situation stank of incompetence.

'As I was saying,' Lorn continued, 'I won't be here long. When I am here, however,' and her voice hardened, 'I will make plain to the High Mage that his interference in the city's management will not be tolerated. If you need backing, you have it, Dujek.'

They stopped just outside the building's entrance, and the old man gazed steadily at her, as if weighing her sincerity. But when he spoke, his words surprised her. 'I can take care of my own problems, Adjunct. Do what you will, but I'm not asking for anything.'

'You'll permit the excessive culling of the nobility, then?'

Dujek's expression set into stubborn lines. 'Battle tactics can be applied in any situation, Adjunct. And the High Mage is no tactician.' He turned and led her up the steps. Two guards opened the doors, which looked new and were banded in bronze. The High Fist and the Adjunct entered.

They strode down a long, wide hallway marked by doors on either side every dozen feet or so. Marines stood guard before each one, hands on their weapons. It was clear to Lorn that the incident with the Hound had heightened wariness to an almost absurd degree. Then a thought struck her. 'High Fist, have there been attempts on your life?'

Dujek's grunt was amused. 'Four in the last week, Adjunct. You get used to it. All these marines here volunteered themselves – they don't even listen to me any more. The last assassin was so badly chopped up I couldn't even make out if it was a man or a woman.'

'You've a lot of Seven Cities natives in your legions, High Fist?'

'Aye. Loyal to a fault when they want to be.'

Loyal to what, Lorn wondered, and to whom? Seven Cities recruits were being sent elsewhere these days. The Empress did not wish Dujek's soldiers to become aware that their homeland was on the brink of open rebellion. Such news might well tip the scales here on Genabackis, and that in turn would trigger Seven Cities itself. Both Lorn and the Empress were well aware how dangerous things had become, and they had to tread carefully

indeed in their efforts to repair the damage. And it was now becoming obvious that Tayschrenn presented a major problem.

She realized that she needed Dujek's support more than he needed hers.

They arrived at the hall's end where stood massive double doors. The soldiers at either side saluted the High Fist then opened them. Beyond was a large chamber dominated by a hardwood table in its centre. Maps, scrolls, ink and paint jars crowded its surface. Dujek and Lorn entered and the doors were shut behind them.

'Tayschrenn has been informed of your arrival, but will be delayed somewhat,' Dujek said, sitting on the edge of the table. 'If you have questions regarding the recent events at Pale, ask them now.'

She knew he was giving her the opportunity to hear answers that didn't come from Tayschrenn. Though as to whose version of the truth she would accept was up to her. Lorn began to appreciate Dujek's comment about battle tactics. She strode to a nearby chair and settled slowly into its cushions. 'Very well, High Fist. Small matters first. Have you encountered any difficulty with the Moranth?'

Dujek scowled. 'Funny you should ask. They're getting pretty high-minded about some things. I had a hell of a time getting the Gold legions – their elite warriors – to fight Caladan Brood. Seems they consider him too honourable to treat as an enemy. The whole alliance was on shaky ground for a while there, but in the end they marched. Soon I'll send the Black to join them.'

Lorn nodded. 'Similar problems with the Green and the Blue in Genabaris,' she said, 'which explains why I came overland. The Empress suggests we make the most of the alliance, since it may not last.'

'We haven't much choice,' Dujek growled. 'How many legions will I have in the spring landing?'

Lorn hesitated, then said, 'Two. And a regiment of Wickan lancers. The Wickans and the Eleventh Legion will disembark at Nathilog. The Ninth will land in Nisst and join with the conscript forces – the Empress trusts the

latter reinforcements will be sufficient to break the Crimson Guard at Fox Pass, thus opening Brood's flank.'

'Then the Empress is a fool,' Dujek said, his tone hard. "The conscripts are next to useless, Adjunct, and by this time next year the Crimson Guard will have liberated Nisst, Treet, One Eye Cat, Porule, Garalt and—'

'I know the list.' Lorn rose abruptly. 'You'll receive two more legions next year, High Fist. That's it.'

Dujek thought for a time, his gaze on the map pegged to the table top. Lorn waited. She knew he was lost in reordering, reevaluating his plans for next season's campaign, that he'd entered a world of matériel and divisions, in second-guessing Caladan Brood and the commander of the Crimson Guard, Prince K'azz. Finally he cleared his throat. 'Adjunct, is it possible to reverse the landings? The Eleventh and the Wickan lancers disembarking on the east coast, south of Apple. The Ninth on the west coast, to Tulips.'

Lorn strode to the table and studied the map. *Tulips? Why there?* That made no sense at all. 'The Empress would be curious as to your revised plans, High Fist.'

'Meaning "maybe".' Dujek rubbed the stubble on his jaw, then gave a sharp nod. 'All right, Adjunct. First, the conscripts will not hold Fox Pass. The Crimson Guard will be into the northlands by the time our reinforcements arrive. Much of that area is farmland, pasture. As we retreat, pulling the conscripts back to Nisst, we raze the countryside. No crops, no livestock. Whatever supplies K'azz will need he'll have to bring with him. Now, Adjunct, any army on the move, any army pursuing a routed army, is bound to leave its supply train behind, string it out in its haste to catch its enemy and deliver the killing blow. And that's where the Wickan lancers come in.'

The Wickan were born raiders, Lorn knew. In such countryside they'd be elusive, striking quickly and with deadly consequences. 'And the Eleventh? Where will they be in all this?'

'A third will be stationed in Nisst. The rest will be on the quick march – to Fox Pass.'

'While Caladan Brood remains south of Blackdog Forest? That doesn't make sense, High Fist.'

'You suggested using the Moranth for all it's worth, didn't you? Well, from Tulips the Moranth and their Quorl will be staging a massive lift.' Dujek's gaze narrowed as he studied the map. 'I want the Ninth south of Blackdog Swamp by the time I bring up my forces from here and place them south of Brood. A concerted push from the Gold and Black should push him right into our laps, while his allies, the Crimson Guard, are stuck on the wrong side of Fox Pass.'

'You intend to transport an entire legion by air?'

'Does the Empress want this war won in her lifetime or not?' He pushed himself away from the table and paced. 'Mind you,' he said, as if struck by sudden doubts, 'it may all be academic. If I were Brood I'd ...' His voice trailed away, and he faced the Adjunct. 'Will the transport orders be reversed?'

Lorn searched his face. Something told her that the High Fist had just made an intuitive leap, and it had to do with Caladan Brood, and that as far as Dujek was concerned, it was indeed now academic. She also realized that this was something he wouldn't share with her. She scanned the map again, trying to see what Dujek had seen. But it was hopeless, she was no tactician. Trying to guess Dujek's thoughts was hard enough; but to try the same with Caladan Brood was impossible. 'Your plan, although brash, is now officially accepted on behalf of the Empress. Your request will be fulfilled.'

Dujek nodded half-heartedly.

'One thing, High Fist, before Tayschrenn arrives. There was a Hound of Shadow here?'

'Yes,' the man said. 'I wasn't here at the time, but I saw the mess the beast left behind. If not for Tattersail it would've been far worse.'

Lorn saw a glint of horror in Dujek's eyes and into her mind returned the scene from the coast road west of Itko Kan, two years ago. 'I've seen the

work of Hounds before,' she said, meeting his eyes.

In that moment of locked gazes they shared something profound. Then Dujek pulled his eyes away. 'This Tattersail,' Lorn said, to hide a pang of regret, 'must be a very capable sorceress.'

'The only cadre mage to have survived Tayschrenn's assault on Moon's Spawn,' Dujek replied.

'Indeed?' To Lorn, that revelation was even more remarkable. She wondered if Dujek suspected anything, but his next words put her at ease.

'She called it luck, on both counts, and she might be right.'

'Has she been a cadre mage for a long time?' Lorn asked.

'Ever since I took command. Perhaps eight, nine years.'

The familiarity of Tattersail's name returned to Lorn then, like a mailed fist clenching her heart. She found herself sitting down again, and Dujek had taken a step towards her, genuine concern in his eyes.

'Your injury needs attending to,' he said gruffly. 'I shouldn't have waited.'

'No, no, it's all right. Weariness, that's all.'

He studied her quizzically. 'Would you like some wine, Adjunct?'

She nodded. *Tattersail. Was it possible?* She would know when she saw the woman. She would know then. 'Nine years,' she murmured, 'the Mouse.'

'I beg your pardon?'

She looked up to find Dujek before her. He offered her a goblet of wine. 'Nothing,' she said, as she accepted it. 'Thank you.'

As the double doors swung open both turned. In strode Tayschrenn, his face dark with fury as he confronted Dujek.

'Damn you,' the High Mage grated. 'If you had a hand in this I'll find it, and that is a promise.'

Dujek raised an eyebrow. 'A hand in what, High Mage?' he asked coolly.

'I've just been to the Hall of Records. A fire? The place looks like the inside of an oven.'

Lorn rose and stepped between them. 'High Mage Tayschrenn,' she said, in a low, dangerous tone, 'perhaps you could tell me why this matter of some fire in some bureaucrat's chamber should override all other considerations?'

Tayschrenn blinked. 'I beg your pardon, Adjunct,' he said tightly, 'but within the Hall of Records were the city's census lists.' His dark eyes swung past her to fix on Dujek. 'Wherein all the names of Pale's nobility could be found.'

'Unfortunate,' the High Fist said. 'Have you begun an investigation? My staff's services are, of course, entirely at your disposal.'

'Unnecessary, High Fist,' the wizard drawled sardonically. 'Why make all your other spies redundant?' Tayschrenn paused, then stepped back and bowed to Lorn. 'Greetings, Adjunct. I apologize for this ungracious-seeming reunion—'

'Save your apologies for later,' Lorn said levelly. She faced Dujek. 'Thank you for the wine and conversation,' she said, noting with satisfaction Tayschrenn's stiffening at that. 'I trust there'll be a formal dinner this evening?'

Dujek nodded. 'Of course, Adjunct.'

'Would you be so kind as to request Tattersail's attendance as well?' She felt yet another flinch come from the High Mage, and saw in Dujek's gaze a new respect as he looked upon her, as if acknowledging her own skills in this brand of tactics.

Tayschrenn interrupted. 'Adjunct, the sorceress has been ill as a result of her encounter with the Hound of Shadow,' he turned a smile on Dujek, 'which I'm sure has been described to you by the High Fist.'

Not well enough, Lorn thought ruefully, but let Tayschrenn imagine the worst. 'I'm interested in a wizard's evaluation of that event, High Mage,' she said.

'Which you shall have shortly.'

Dujek bowed. 'I will enquire as to Tattersail's health, Adjunct. If you will excuse me, then, I can be on my way.' He turned to Tayschrenn and gave a curt nod.

Tayschrenn watched the one-armed old man leave the room, then waited for the doors to close once again. 'Adjunct, this situation is—'

'Absurd,' Lorn finished hotly. 'Dammit, Tayschrenn, where's your sense? You've taken on the craftiest bastard the Empire military has ever had the privilege of possessing and he's eating you alive.' She spun to the table and refilled her goblet. 'And you deserve it.'

'Adjunct—'

She faced him. 'No. Listen, Tayschrenn. I speak directly from the Empress. She reluctantly approved your commandeering the assault on Moon's Spawn – but if she'd known you so thoroughly lacked subtlety, she would never have permitted it. Do you take everyone else for fools?'

'Dujek is just one man,' Tayschrenn said.

Lorn took a large mouthful of wine, then set down the goblet and rubbed her brow. 'Dujek's not the enemy,' she said wearily. 'Dujek's never been the enemy.'

Tayschrenn stepped forward. 'He was the Emperor's man, Adjunct.'

'Challenging that man's loyalty to the Empire is insulting, and it's that very insult that may well turn him. Dujek is not just one man. Right now he's ten thousand, and in a year's time he'll be twenty-five thousand. He doesn't yield when you push, does he? No, because he can't. He's got ten thousand soldiers behind him – and, believe me, when they get angry enough to push back, you'll not be able to withstand them. As for Dujek, he'll just end up being carried on the tide.'

'Then he is a traitor.'

'No. He's a man who cares for those he is responsible for and to. He's the best of the Empire. If he's forced to turn, Tayschrenn, then we're the traitors.

Am I getting through?'

The High Mage's face was lined with a deep, disturbed frown. 'Yes, Adjunct,' he said quietly. 'You are.' He looked up. 'This task the Empress has commanded of me, it weighs heavily, Adjunct. These are not my strengths. It would do well if you dismissed me.'

Lorn gave that serious consideration. Mages by nature never commanded loyalty. Fear, yes, and the respect born of fear, but the one thing a mage found difficult to understand or cope with was loyalty. And yet there had been one mage, long ago, who had commanded loyalty – and that was the Emperor. She said, 'High Mage, we are all agreed on one thing. The old guard must disappear. All who stood with the Emperor and still cling to his memory will ever work against us, whether consciously or unconsciously. Dujek is an exception, and there is a handful of others like him. Those we must not lose. As for the others, they have to die. The risk lies in alerting them to that fact. If we're too open we may end up with an insurrection the size of which could destroy the Empire.'

'Apart from Dujek and Tattersail,' Tayschrenn said, 'we've cleaned out everyone else. As for Whiskeyjack and his squad, he's all yours, Adjunct.'

'With luck,' Lorn said, then frowned as the High Mage winced. 'What's the matter?'

He rose. 'I peruse my Deck of Dragons nightly,' he said. 'And I'm certain that Oponn has entered the world of mortal affairs. Tattersail's own reading did much to confirm my suspicions.'

Lorn looked at him sharply. 'She's an Adept?'

'Far more adept than I,' Tayschrenn admitted.

Lorn thought. 'What can you tell me of Oponn's involvement?'

'Darujhistan,' Tayschrenn replied.

Lorn closed her eyes. 'I was afraid you'd say that. We need Darujhistan – desperately. Its wealth, coming into our hands, would break this continent's back.'

'I know, Adjunct. But the matter is even worse than you realize. I also believe that, somehow, Whiskeyjack and Tattersail are in league with one another.'

'Any word of what happened to Captain Paran?'

'None. Someone is hiding him, or his body. I'm inclined to believe he's dead, Adjunct, but his soul has yet to pass through Hood's Gate and only a mage could prevent that.'

'Tattersail?'

The High Mage shrugged. 'Possibly. I would know more of this captain's role in all this.'

Lorn hesitated, then said, 'He was engaged in a long, arduous search.'

Tayschrenn growled, 'Perhaps he found whatever he was seeking.'

Lorn eyed him. 'Perhaps. Tell me, how good is Tattersail?'

'Good enough to be a High Mage,' Tayschrenn said. 'Good enough to survive a Hound's attack and to drive it away, though I would not think such a thing possible. Even I would have difficulty managing that.'

'Maybe she had help,' Lorn murmured.

'I hadn't thought of that.'

"Think on it now,' Lorn said. 'But before you do, the Empress requests that you continue your efforts, though not against Dujek. You're needed here as a conduit in case my mission goes wrong in Darujhistan. Do not involve yourself with managing the occupation of Pale. Further, you are to provide Dujek with details on Oponn's appearance. If a god has entered the fray, he has a right to know and to plan accordingly.'

'How can one plan anything with Oponn in the game?'

'Leave that to Dujek.' She studied his face. 'Do you have difficulty with any of these instructions?'

Tayschrenn smiled. 'In truth, Adjunct, I'm greatly relieved.'

Lorn nodded. 'Good. Now, I need a mundane healer and quarters.'

'Of course.' Tayschrenn strode to the doors, then paused and turned. 'Adjunct, I am glad you're here.'

'Thank you, High Mage.' After he left, Lorn sank into her chair and her mind travelled back nine years, to the sights and sounds experienced by a child, to a night, one particular night in the Mouse, when every nightmare a young girl's imagination could hold became real. She remembered blood, blood everywhere, and the empty faces of her mother, her father and older brother – faces numbed by the realization that they'd been spared, that the blood wasn't their own. As the memories stalked once again through her mind, a name rode the winds, rustling in the air as if clawing through dead branches. Lorn's lips parted, and she whispered, 'Tattersail.'

The sorceress had found the strength to leave her bed. She now stood at the window, leaning with one hand against the frame for support, and looked down on a street crowded with military wagons. The systematic plunder that quartermasters called 'resupply' was well under way. The eviction of nobility and gentry from their familial estates for the stationing of the officer corps, of which she was one, had ended days ago, while the repairing of the outer walls, the refitting of sundered gates, and the clearing of 'Moon rain' continued apace.

She was glad she'd missed the river of corpses that must have filled the city streets during the initial phase of clean-up – wagon after wagon groaning beneath the weight of crushed bodies, white flesh seared by fire and slashed by sword, rat-gnawed and raven-pecked – men, women, and children. It was a scene she had witnessed before, and she had no wish ever to see it again.

Now, shock and terror had seeped down and out of sight. Scenes of normality reappeared as farmers and merchants emerged from hiding to meet the needs of occupiers and occupied alike. Malazan healers had swept the city, rooting out the birthing of plague and treating common ailments

among all those they touched. No citizen would have been turned from their path. And sentiments began the long, perfectly planned swing.

Soon, Tattersail knew, there'd be the culling of the nobility, a scourge that would raise to the gallows the greediest, least-liked nobles. And the executions would be public. A tried and true procedure that swelled recruitment on a tide of base vengeance – with every hand stained by a righteous glee. A sword in such hands completed the conspiracy and included all players in the hunt for the next victim to the cause – the Empire's cause.

She'd seen it run its course in a hundred such cities. No matter how benign the original rulers, no matter how generous the nobility, the word of Empire, weighted by might, twisted the past into a tyranny of demons. A sad comment on humanity, a bitter lesson made foul by her own role in it.

In her mind returned the faces of the Bridgeburners, a strange counterpoint to the cynicism with which she viewed all around her. Whiskeyjack, a man pushed to the edge, or, rather, the edge creeping on him on all sides, a crumbling of beliefs, a failing of faiths, leaving as his last claim to humanity his squad, a shrinking handful of the only people that mattered any more. But he held on, and he pushed back – pushed back hard. She liked to think – no, she wanted to believe – he would win out in the end, that he'd live to see his world stripped of the Empire.

Quick Ben and Kalam, seeking to take the responsibility from their sergeant's shoulders. It was their only means of loving the man, though they'd never put it in such terms. In the others, barring Sorry, she saw the same, yet with them there was a desperation that she found endearing, a child-like yearning to relieve Whiskeyjack of everything their grim place had laid upon him.

She responded to them in a way deeper than she'd thought possible, from a core she'd long been convinced was burned out, the ashes scattered in silent lament – a core no mage could afford. Tattersail recognized the danger, but that only made it all the more alluring.

Sorry was another matter, and she found herself avoiding even thinking about that young woman.

And that left Paran. What to do about this captain? At the moment the man was in the room, seated on the bed behind her and oiling his sword, Chance. They'd not spoken much since she'd awakened four days ago. There was still too much distrust.

Perhaps it was that mystery, that uncertainty, that made them so attracted to one another. And the attraction was obvious: even now, with her back to the man, she sensed a taut thread between them. Whatever energy burned between them, it felt dangerous. Which made it exciting.

Tattersail sighed. Hairlock had appeared this very morning, eager and agitated about something. The puppet would not answer their queries, but the sorceress suspected that Hairlock had found a trail, and it seemed it might take the puppet out of Pale and on to Darujhistan.

That was not a happy thought.

She stiffened as the ward she'd placed outside her door was tripped. Tattersail whirled to Paran. 'A visitor,' she said.

He rose, Chance in his hands.

The sorceress waved her hand over him. 'You're no longer visible, Captain. Nor can anyone sense your presence. Make no sound, and wait here.' She strode into the outer room just as a soft knock sounded on the door.

She opened it to see a young marine standing in the hallway. 'What is it?' she demanded.

The marine bowed. 'High Fist Dujek is enquiring as to your health, Sorceress.'

'Much better,' she said. 'That's kind of him. Now, if you'll—'

The marine interrupted diffidently. 'If you answered as you just have, I am to convey the High Fist's request that you attend a formal supper this evening in the main building.'

Tattersail cursed silently. She shouldn't have told the truth. Now, it was too late. A 'request' from her commander was not something that could be denied. 'Inform the High Fist that I will be honoured to share his company over supper.' A thought struck her. 'May I ask who else will be present?'

'High Mage Tayschrenn, a messenger named Toc the Younger, and Adjunct Lorn.'

'Adjunct Lorn is here?'

'Arrived this morning, Sorceress.'

Oh, Hood's Breath. 'Convey my reply,' Tattersail said, struggling against a rising tide of fear. She shut the door, then heard the marine's boots hurrying down the hallway.

'What's wrong?' Paran asked, from the opposite doorway.

She faced him. 'Put that sword away, Captain.' She walked over to the dresser and began rummaging through the drawers. 'I'm to attend a dinner,' she said.

Paran approached. 'An official gathering.'

Tattersail nodded distractedly. 'With Adjunct Lorn there as well, as if Tayschrenn isn't bad enough.'

The Captain murmured, 'So she's finally arrived.'

Tattersail froze. She turned to him slowly. 'You've been expecting her, haven't you?'

Paran started and looked at her with frightened eyes.

She realized his mumbling hadn't been meant for her ears. 'Dammit,' she hissed. 'You're working for her!'

The captain's answer was clear as he spun round. She watched him vanish into the bedroom, her thoughts a storm of fury. The threads of conspiracy now thrummed in her mind. So, Quick Ben's suspicions had been accurate: a plan was afoot to kill the squad. Did that make her life at risk as well? She felt herself nearing a decision. What that decision was she wasn't sure, but

there was a direction to her thoughts now, and it had the inevitable momentum of an avalanche.

The seventh bell was ringing from some distant tower as Toc the Younger passed into the Empire headquarters.

He showed his invitation to yet another grim-faced, intense guard, and was grudgingly allowed to continue on down the main hall to the dining chamber. Unease churned in Toc's stomach. He knew the Adjunct was behind the request, but she could be as unpredictable and as manipulative as the rest. Beyond the doors he now approached might as well be a pit filled with vipers, all hungrily awaiting his arrival.

Toc wondered if he'd be able to keep anything down, and knowing the condition of his facial wound, he then wondered grimly if anyone else would be able to keep anything down. Among his fellow soldiers his scars were barely noticed: rare was the soldier in Dujek's army who did not carry a scar or three. Those few friends he had seemed simply thankful that he still lived.

In the Seven Cities, superstition held that loss of an eye was also the birth of inner sight. He'd been reminded of that belief at least a dozen times in the last couple of weeks. There had been no secret gift granted him in exchange for his eye. Flashes of searing light ripped through his mind every now and then, but he suspected that was no more than a memory of the last thing his eye had seen: fire.

And now he was about to sit among the loftiest company in the Empire, barring the Empress herself. Suddenly the wound was a thing of shame. He'd sit there as testament to the horrors of war – Toc stiffened just outside the dining room door. Was that why the Adjunct had invited him? He hesitated, then shrugged and entered.

Dujek, Tayschrenn and the Adjunct turned as one to regard him. Toe the Younger bowed.

'Thank you for coming,' Adjunct Lorn said. She stood with the two men near the largest of three fireplaces, in the wall opposite the entrance. 'Please, join us. We're now awaiting but one more guest.'

Toe strode to them, thankful for Dujek's grin. The High Fist set his crystal goblet down on the mantel and deliberately scratched the stump of his left arm.

'Bet it's driving you half crazed,' the old man said, his grin broadening.

'I scratch with both hands,' Toc said.

Dujek barked a laugh. 'Join us in a drink?'

'Thank you.' He noticed Lorn's appraisal as he accepted a goblet from Dujek. Taking the decanter from a nearby table, his glance crossed the High Mage, but Tayschrenn's attention was fixed on the roaring fire behind Lorn.

'Has your horse recovered?' the Adjunct asked.

Toc nodded as he filled his goblet. 'Doing handstands the last time I looked in on her,' he said.

Lorn smiled tentatively, as if unsure whether he was mocking her. 'I've explained your vital role in keeping me alive, Toc the Younger, how you loosed four arrows on the fly, and brought down four Barghast.'

He looked at her sharply. 'I didn't know I had the last two shots in me,' he said. He sipped wine, resisting the urge to scratch his wound.

Dujek grunted. 'Your father was also in the habit of surprising people. There's a man I miss.'

'I, too,' Toc replied, looking down.

The awkward silence that followed this exchange was mercifully broken by the arrival of the last guest. Toc turned with the others as the door swung open. He gazed at the woman standing in the entrance, then started. Was that Tattersail? He'd never seen her wearing anything but battle garb, and was now stunned. My, he thought wonderingly, she's not bad, if you like them big, that is. He half grinned.

Lorn's response to Tattersail's appearance had sounded much like a gasp, then she spoke. 'We have met before, though I doubt you'd remember.'

Tattersail blinked. 'I think I would have recalled that,' she said cautiously.

'I think not. I was but eleven years old at the time.'

'Then you must be mistaken. I'm rarely in the company of children.'

'They burned the Mouse Quarter a week after you swept through it, Tattersail.' Lorn's voice made everyone stiffen with its barely controlled rage. 'Those survivors, the ones you left behind, were resettled in Mock's Hole. And in those plague-ridden caverns my mother, my father and my brother died.'

The blood drained from Tattersail's round face.

Bewildered, Toc glanced at the others. Dujek's expression was masked, but there was a storm behind his eyes as he studied Lorn. On Tayschrenn's face, as he looked upon the sorceress, there dawned a sudden light.

'It was our first command,' Tattersail said quietly.

Toc saw Lorn trembling and held his breath. But when she spoke it was controlled, the words precise. 'An explanation is required.' She turned to High Fist Dujek. 'They were recruits, a cadre of mages. They were in Malaz City, awaiting their new commander, when the Master of the Claw issued an edict against sorcery. They were sent into the Old City – the Mouse – to cleanse it. They were –' her voice caught '- indiscriminate.' She swung her attention back to Tattersail. 'This woman was one of those mages. Sorceress, that night was my last with my family. I was given to the Claw the very next day. The news of my family's death was kept from me for years. Yet,' her words fell to a whisper, 'I well remember that night – the blood, the screams.'

Tattersail seemed unable to speak. The air in the room had grown thick, stifling. Finally the sorceress prised her gaze from the Adjunct and said to Dujek, 'High Fist, it was our first command. We lost control. I resigned from the officer corps the very next day and was posted with another Army.'

She gathered herself. 'If it is the Adjunct's wish to convene a court, I offer no defence and will accept my execution as a just penalty.'

Lorn replied, 'That is acceptable.' She laid her left hand upon her sword and prepared to withdraw it.

'No,' High Fist Dujek said. 'It is not acceptable.'

Lorn froze. She glared at the old man. 'You seem to forget my rank.'

'No, I haven't. Adjunct, if it is your will that those within the Empire who have committed crimes in the Emperor's name must be executed,' he stepped forward, 'then you must include me. Indeed, I believe High Mage Tayschrenn also has his share of horror committed on the Emperor's behalf. And, finally, there is the Empress herself to consider. Laseen, after all, commanded the Emperor's Claw – she created it, in fact. More, the Edict was hers, thankfully short-lived as it was.' He turned to Tattersail. 'I was there, Tattersail. Under Whiskeyjack's command I was sent down to rein you in, which I did.'

She shook her head. 'Whiskeyjack commanded?' Her eyes narrowed. 'This has the taste of a god's game.'

Dujek swung back to the Adjunct. 'The Empire has its history, and we each are in it.'

'In this,' Tayschrenn rasped, 'I must agree with the High Fist, Adjunct.'

'There's no need to have all this official,' Tattersail said, her eyes on Lorn. 'I hereby challenge you to a duel. On my behalf I shall employ all my magical skills in an effort to destroy you. You may defend with your sword, Adjunct.'

Toc took a step forward. He opened his mouth, then closed it again. He'd been about to tell Tattersail that Lorn carried an Otataral sword, that the duel would be grossly unfair, that she'd die within seconds, as the sword devoured her every spell. Then he saw that the sorceress knew all that.

Dujek rounded on Tattersail. 'Dammit, woman! Do you think everything hinges on how it's worded? Execution. Duel. None of it matters one whit!

All that the Adjunct does, all that she says, is on behalf of Empress Laseen.' He spun to Lorn. 'You are here as Laseen's voice, as her will, Adjunct.'

Tayschrenn spoke softly, 'The woman named Lorn, the woman who once was a child, who once had a family,' he looked upon the Adjunct with anguish in his eyes, 'that woman does not exist. She ceased to exist the day she became the Adjunct.'

Lorn stared at the two men, her eyes wide.

Standing beside her, Toc watched those words battering her will, crushing the anger, shattering into dust every last vestige of identity. And from her eyes rose the icy, clinical repose of the Adjunct to the Empress. Toc felt his heart pounding hard against his chest. He'd just witnessed an execution. The woman named Lorn had risen from the turgid mists of the past, risen to right a wrong, to find justice and in that last act reclaim its life – and she had been denied. Not by the words of Dujek or Tayschrenn, but by the thing known as the Adjunct.

'Of course,' she said, removing her hand from her sword. 'Please enter, Sorceress Tattersail, and dine with us.'

The flat tone of her voice told Toc that her invitation had not cost anything – and this horrified him, shook him to his very core. A quick glance showed a similar response from Tayschrenn and Dujek, though the latter veiled it.

Tattersail looked positively ill, but she nodded shakily in answer to the Adjunct's invitation.

Toc found the decanter and a spare crystal goblet. He walked up to the sorceress. 'I am Toc the Younger,' he said, smiling, 'and you need a drink.' He poured the glass full and handed it to her. 'Often, when we camped on the march, I'd see you lugging that travelling wardrobe of yours around. Now I finally see what was in it. Sorceress, you're a sight for a sore eye.'

A look of gratitude entered Tattersail's gaze. She raised an eyebrow. 'I hadn't realized my travelling wardrobe garnered such attention.'

Toc grinned. 'I'm afraid you've provided a standing joke in the Second. Anything surprising, be it an ambush or an unplanned skirmish – the enemy invariably came from your travelling wardrobe, Sorceress.'

Dujek guffawed behind him. 'I've often wondered where that phrase came from, and damn, I heard it a lot – even from my officers.'

The atmosphere in the room relaxed somewhat; though undercurrents of tension still swirled, they seemed to be between Tattersail and High Mage Tayschrenn. The sorceress turned her gaze upon Lorn whenever the Adjunct's attention was elsewhere, and Toc could see the compassion there, and his respect for her rose considerably. In her shoes, any look he gave Lorn would have been filled with fear. And whatever storm threatened between Tattersail and Tayschrenn seemed born of a difference in opinion coupled with suspicion; it didn't look personal.

Then again, Toc considered, Dujek's steady presence may have been providing the levelling influence. His father had spoken much of Dujek, of a man who never lost his touch with the powerless or the less powerful. In dealing with the former, he always made his own failings an easy recognition; and with the latter he had an unerring eye that cut away personal ambition with the precision of a surgeon removing septic flesh, leaving in its place someone who treated trust and honesty as givens.

Studying Dujek's easy, relaxed rapport with the others in attendance, including himself, and then with the servants who filed in bearing trays of food, it struck Toc that the man had not changed perceptibly from the one Toc the Elder had called friend. And that impressed Toc deeply, knowing as he did the pressures that burdened the High Fist.

As soon as everyone was seated and the first course presented, it was Adjunct Lorn who took command, however. Dujek relinquished it without a word or a gesture, evidently confident that the earlier incident was now over as far as the Adjunct was concerned.

Lorn addressed Tattersail in that uncanny, flat voice. 'Sorceress, permit me to compliment you on besting a Hound of Shadow, and on your timely

recovery. I know that Tayschrenn has questioned you regarding this incident, but I would like to hear the tale from you directly.'

Tattersail set down her goblet and regarded her plate briefly before meeting the Adjunct's steady gaze. 'As the High Mage may have explained, it's now clear that the gods have entered the fray. Specifically, they've become involved with the Empire's plans for Darujhistan—'

Toc rose quickly. 'I believe,' he said, 'I should excuse myself now, as what will be discussed here exceeds—'

'Be seated, Toc the Younger,' Lorn commanded. 'You are the Claw representative here, and as such you are responsible for speaking on its behalf.'

'I am?'

'You are.'

Slowly, Toc sat.

'Please continue, Sorceress.'

Tattersail nodded. 'Oponn is central to this gambit. The Twin Jesters' opening move has created ripples – I'm sure the High Mage would agree with this – and thus attracted the attention of other gods.'

'Shadowthrone,' Lorn said. She looked to Tayschrenn.

The High Mage concurred. 'One could expect such a thing. I, however, have sensed nothing of Shadowthrone's attention upon us, even though I pursued that possibility vigorously after the Hound's attack.'

Lorn exhaled slowly. 'Sorceress, please go on.'

'The Hound's presence was triggered entirely by accident,' Tattersail said, flicking a glance at Tayschrenn. 'I was doing a reading from my Deck of Dragons, and came upon the card of the Hound. As with all Adepts, I found the image animate to a certain extent. When I gave it my full concentration, it felt,' she cleared her throat, 'as if a portal opened, created entirely from the other side of that card – from High House Shadow itself.' She raised her

hands and gazed steadily at the High Mage. 'Is this possible? The Shadow Realm is new among the Houses, its full power not yet expressed. Well, whatever happened – a portal, a rent – the Hound Gear appeared.'

'Then why,' Tayschrenn asked, 'did it appear in the street? Why not in your room?'

Tattersail smiled. 'I can speculate.'

'Please do,' the Adjunct said.

'I have wards about my room,' Tattersail said. 'The innermost of these are High Thyr.'

Tayschrenn started at that, clearly surprised.

'Such wards,' Tattersail continued, 'create a flux, a tide of power that surges and ebbs like a pulsing heart, one that is beating very fast. I suspect that these wards were sufficient to bounce the Hound away from my immediate area, since in its transitional state – half-way between its realm and ours – the Hound could not fully express its powers. Once it had arrived, however, it could, and it did.'

'How did you manage to fend off a Hound of Shadow?' Tayschrenn asked.

'Luck,' Tattersail replied, without hesitation. Her answer hung in the air, and it seemed to Toc that everyone had forgotten their meal.

'In other words,' Lorn said slowly, 'you believe that Oponn intervened.'

'I do.'

'Why?'

Tattersail barked a laugh. 'If I could work that out, Adjunct, I'd be a happy woman. As it is,' her humour fell away, 'it seems we're being used. The Empire itself has become a pawn.'

'Is there a way out?' Dujek asked, his words a growl that startled everyone.

Tattersail shrugged. 'If there is, it lies in Darujhistan, since that's where Oponn's gambit seems centred. Mind you, High Fist, drawing us into Darujhistan might well be what Oponn seeks to achieve.'

Toc sat back, absently scratching his wound. There was more to it, he suspected, though he could find no discernible source for his suspicion. He scratched harder. Tattersail could be glib when she wanted to be; her story had a straightforwardness to it. The best lies were the simple ones. Still, nobody else seemed unduly suspicious. The sorceress had shifted attention from her story to its implications for future action. She had everyone thinking past her, and the faster their thoughts raced, the further behind they left their doubts about her.

He watched her watching the others, and was the only one to notice the flash of triumph and relief in her eyes when Lorn spoke.

'Oponn is not the first god seeking to manipulate the Malazan Empire,' the Adjunct said. 'Others have failed, come away bloodied. It's unfortunate the lesson was lost on Oponn – and on Shadowthrone, for that matter.' She sighed deeply. 'Tattersail, whatever your differences with the High Mage, it is necessary, no, vital, that you work together in seeking to discover the details of Oponn's intervention. In the meantime, High Fist Dujek will continue preparing his legion to march, as well as solidifying our hold on Pale. For myself, I will be leaving the city shortly. Rest assured, my mission has goals identical to yours. Now, one last thing,' she turned to Toc, 'I wish to hear the Claw's evaluation of the words that have been exchanged here.'

He stared in surprise. He'd assumed the role she had expected of him without even realizing it. He sat straight and glanced at Tattersail. She now looked nervous, drawing her hands beneath the table. He waited until their gazes locked and held before he turned to the Adjunct.

'In so far as she knows it, the sorceress speaks the truth,' he said. 'Her speculations were genuine, although concerning the dynamics of magic I'm at a loss. Perhaps High Mage Tayschrenn could comment on that.'

Lorn seemed vaguely disappointed with Toc's evaluation, but she nodded anyway and said, 'Accepted, then. High Mage?'

Tayschrenn released a slow breath. 'Accurate,' he said. 'Speculation is sound.'

Toc refilled his goblet. The first course was removed almost untouched, but as the second course arrived everyone turned their full attention to it and conversation ceased. Toc ate slowly, avoiding Tattersail's eyes, though he sensed them upon him time and again. He wondered at his own actions: deceiving the Adjunct to the Empress, the High Mage and the High Fist all in one shot struck him as rash, if not suicidal. And his reasons for doing so were not entirely rational, which made it all the more distressing.

The 2nd had a long, bloody history. More times than Toc could count someone had come through for someone else whatever the odds. And, more often than not, it had been the mage cadre. He'd been there on the plain outside Pale, and he'd watched with a thousand others the cadre being torn apart, hopelessly outmatched. That kind of waste didn't sit well with the 2nd. And, though he was a Claw, the faces that surrounded him, the faces that looked upon him in hope, despair, and – at times – fatal resignation, those faces had been mirrors of his own, and they defied the Claw at every turn. The years in the Claw where feeling and caring had been systematically assailed, those years failed to withstand the day-in, day-out reality that was the 2nd Army.

This night, and with his words, Toc had given something back to Tattersail, not just for her but for the cadre. It didn't matter if she understood, and he knew she must be feeling bewildered by his actions; none of that mattered. What he'd done he'd done for himself.

He sat up. Now that's odd, he thought, my wound's stopped itching.

Feeling light-headed, Tattersail wobbled every now and then as she walked down the hall towards the door to her room. She knew it wasn't the wine. With her nerves as frayed as they were, that fine vintage had tasted like water, and had had as much effect.

Adjunct Lorn had raised in the sorceress memories she'd spent years burying. For Lorn, it had been a pivotal event. But for Tattersail, it had been

just one nightmare among many. Still, it had pushed her where other crimes had not, and as a result she'd found herself attached to the 2nd Army – the Army she'd been sent to as a recruit, the closing of a circle, but in that time she had changed.

That attachment, those twenty-odd years of service, had this night saved her life. She knew that Toc the Younger had lied for her, and the look he had given her prior to stating his evaluation had been a message she'd understood. Though he had come to the 2nd as a Claw, as a spy, not even his years of training within that secret organization could withstand the new world in which he'd found himself.

Tattersail understood this all too clearly, for the same had happened to her. The sorceress in a cadre of mages who had entered the Mouse Quarter so long ago had cared naught for anyone but herself. Even her attempt to cut herself away from the horrors of which she'd been part had been born of a selfish desire to flee, to absolve her own conscience – but the Empire had denied her in this. An old soldier had come to her the day after the slaughter in the Mouse Quarter. Old, nameless, a veteran sent to convince the sorceress that she was still needed. She well remembered his words. 'Should you ever outrun the guilt within your past, Sorceress, you will have outrun your soul. When it finds you again it will kill you.' And then, rather than deny her desperate needs absolutely, he'd sent her into a veteran army, the 5th, until the time came for her to return – to the 2nd, to a place under the command of Dujek Onearm. With that, she'd been given a second chance.

Tattersail came to her door and paused to sense the condition of her wards. All was well. Sighing, she entered her room, then leaned against the door as it closed behind her.

Captain Paran stepped out from the bedroom, his expression wary and somehow shy. 'Not under arrest? I'm surprised.'

'So am I,' she replied.

'Hairlock was here,' Paran said. 'He instructed me to give you a message.'

Tattersail studied the man's face, seeking a hint of what he was about to deliver. He avoided her gaze and remained standing near the doorway into

the bedroom. 'Well?' she demanded.

Paran cleared his throat. 'First, he was, uh, excited. He knew of the Adjunct's arrival, and said she wasn't alone.'

'Not alone? Did he explain that?'

Paran shrugged. 'Said the dust walks around the Adjunct, the dirt shifts beneath her boots, and the wind whispers of frost and fire.' He raised his eyebrows. 'Does that explain anything? Damned if I know.'

Tattersail strode to her dresser. She began to remove the scant jewellery she'd donned for the dinner. 'I think it does,' she said slowly. 'Did he say anything else?'

'He did. He said that the Adjunct and her companion were leaving Pale soon, and that he intended to track them. Sorceress ...'

She saw that Paran was struggling with something, as if fighting his every instinct. Tattersail laid one arm on the dresser and waited. When he met her gaze, her breath caught. 'You were about to say something,' she said, her voice low. Her heart was pounding all too fast, and she felt her body responding as if of its own accord. The look she'd seen in his eyes had been clear in its meaning.

'I know something of the Adjunct's mission,' he said. 'I was to be her contact in Darujhistan.'

Whatever had been building between them disintegrated as Tattersail's eyes went hard and anger darkened her face. 'She's going to Darujhistan, is she? And you and she were to oversee the long-awaited demise of the Bridgeburners. Together, you thought you'd be able to kill Whiskeyjack, to cut down his squad from within.'

'No!' Paran took a step forward, but when Tattersail shot out her hand, palm facing him, he froze. 'Wait,' he whispered. 'Before you do anything, just hear me out.'

Her Thyr Warren surged into her hand, eager for release. 'Why? Damn Oponn for letting you live!'

'Tattersail, please!'

She scowled. 'Speak.'

Paran stepped back and turned to a nearby chair. Hands held out at his sides, he sat down and looked up at her.

'Keep those hands there,' Tattersail commanded. 'Away from your sword.'

'This has been the Adjunct's personal mission, from the very start. Three years ago I was stationed in Itko Kan, Officers Corps. One day every available soldier was mustered out and marched to a section of the coast road.' Paran's hands had begun to shake, and the muscles of his jaw stood out. 'What we saw there, Tattersail, you would not believe.'

She recalled Quick Ben and Kalam's story. 'A massacre. A company of cavalry.'

Astonishment showed on Paran's face. 'How did you know?'

'Go on, Captain,' she grated.

'Adjunct Lorn arrived from the capital and took charge. She guessed that the massacre had been a ... a diversion. We began upon a trail. It was not a clear one, not at first. Sorceress, may I lower my arms?'

'Slowly. On the chair arms, Captain.'

He sighed gratefully and set down his trembling forearms as she'd instructed. 'Anyway, the Adjunct determined that a girl had been taken, possessed by a god.'

'Which god?'

Paran made a face. 'Come, now, if you know of the massacre, is it hard to guess? That company was killed by Shadow Hounds. Which god? Well, Shadowthrone comes to mind,' he said sarcastically. 'The Adjunct believes Shadowthrone was involved, but the god that possessed the girl was the Rope – I know of no other name for him – the Patron of Assassins, Shadowthrone's companion.'

Tattersail dropped her arm. She'd closed her Warren a minute earlier, since it had begun to push hard and she had feared she didn't have the strength to resist it much longer. 'You've found the girl,' she stated dully.

Paran sat forward. 'Yes!'

'Her name's Sorry.'

'You're aware of this,' Paran said, sinking back into the chair. 'Which means that Whiskeyjack is also aware, since who else could have told you?' He looked up into her eyes with a clouded expression. 'I'm now very confused.'

'You're not alone,' Tattersail said. 'So all this – your arrival, the Adjunct's – it was all a hunt for the girl?' She shook her head. 'That's not enough, it can't be enough, Captain.'

'It's all that I'm aware of, Tattersail.'

She studied him for a moment. 'I believe you. Tell me, what are the details of the Adjunct's mission?'

'I don't know,' Paran said, tossing up his hands. 'Somehow, I was the one she'd be able to find, so my being with the squad would bring her to the girl.'

'The Adjunct's talents are many,' Tattersail mused. 'Through the antithesis of sorcery, she might well possess the ability to have linked with you, especially if you've been in her company for the past two years.'

'Then why isn't she breaking down your door?'

Tattersail's eyes were on the jewellery scattered on the dresser. 'Oponn severed the link, Captain.'

'I dislike the thought of exchanging one set of shackles for another,' Paran grumbled.

'There's more to this,' Tattersail insisted, more to herself than to the captain. 'Lorn has a T'lan Imass with her.'

Paran jerked upright.

'Hairlock's snide hints,' she explained. 'I believe the mission was two-fold. Kill Sorry, yes, but also kill Whiskeyjack and his squad. The T'lan would not be involved if her plan concerned just you. Her Otataral sword is sufficient to destroy Sorry, and possibly kill the Rope as well, assuming that's who's possessing the girl.'

'I would not like to believe that,' Paran said. 'They are my command. My responsibility. The Adjunct would not betray me so—'

'Wouldn't she? Why not?'

The captain seemed at a loss to answer her, but there was a stubborn glower in his eyes.

Tattersail reached the decision she had sensed was coming, and it left her cold. 'Hairlock left too early. The puppet was eager, too eager to pursue the Adjunct and that T'lan Imass. He must have discovered something about them, about what they're up to.'

'Who is Hairlock's master?' Paran asked.

'Quick Ben, Whiskeyjack's mage.' She looked to him. 'He's the best I've seen. Not the most powerful, mind you, but smart. Still, if the T'lan Imass comes on him unawares he won't stand a chance, and neither will the rest.' She paused, her eyes holding on the captain. 'I have to leave Pale,' she said abruptly.

Paran shot to his feet. 'Not alone.'

'Alone,' Tattersail insisted. 'I have to find Whiskeyjack, and if you're tagging along then Lorn will find him too.'

'I refuse to believe the Adjunct presents any risk to the sergeant,' Paran said. 'Tell me, can you succeed in killing Sorry? Even with Quick Ben's help?'

The sorceress hesitated. 'I'm not sure I want to,' she said slowly.

'What?'

'It has to be Whiskeyjack's decision, Captain. And I don't think I can give any good reason for convincing you of that. I just feel it's right.' She felt herself relying on instinct in this matter, but vowed to hold true to it.

'Even so,' Paran said, 'I can't remain hiding here, can I? What do I eat? The bedding?'

'I can get you out into the city,' Tattersail said. 'None will recognize you. Take a room in an inn and stay out of your uniform. If all goes well I'll be back in two weeks. You can wait that long, can't you, Captain?'

Paran stared. 'And what happens if I just walk out of here and introduce myself to Dujek Onearm?'

'The High Mage Tayschrenn would shred your brain with truth-seeking sorcery, Captain. You've Oponn's touch, and after tonight Oponn is now an official enemy of the Empire. And when Tayschrenn's done he'll leave you to die, which is preferable to the madness that would grip you if he kept you alive. He'll show that mercy, at least.' Tattersail anticipated Paran's thoughts. 'Dujek might well seek to protect you, but in this Tayschrenn outranks him. You've become a tool of Oponn, and for Dujek the safety of his soldiers takes precedence over his pleasure in frustrating Tayschrenn. So, in fact, he might not protect you at all. I'm sorry, Captain, but you're truly alone if you walk.'

'I'll be alone when you leave, too, Sorceress.'

'I know, but it won't be for ever.' She searched his eyes and felt compassion welling behind her own. 'Paran,' she said, 'it's not all bad. Despite all the distrust between us, I'm feeling things for you I haven't felt for anyone in – well, in some time.' She smiled sadly. 'I don't know what that's worth, Captain, but I'm glad I said it anyway.'

Paran gazed at her for a long minute, then said, 'Very well, Tattersail, I'll do as you ask. An inn? Do you have some local coin?'

'Easily acquired.' Her shoulders slumped. 'I'm sorry, but I'm exhausted.' As she turned to the bedroom her gaze fell on the dresser-top one last time.

Amid a small pile of underclothing she saw her Deck of Dragons. It would be foolish not to do a reading, considering the decision she'd made.

Paran spoke close behind her. 'Tattersail, how thorough is your exhaustion?'

She felt the heat in his words triggering a smouldering fire beneath her stomach, and her gaze slid away from the Deck as she turned to face the captain. Though she voiced no reply to his question, her answer was clear. He took her hand, surprising her with such an innocent gesture. So young, she thought, and now he's leading me into the bedroom. She would have laughed if the act hadn't been so sweet.

False dawn played the eastern horizon as Adjunct Lorn guided her mount and packhorse out from Pale's East Gate. True to Dujek's words the guards were nowhere in sight, and the gate had been left open. She hoped the few sleepy eyes that had followed her through the streets had only mild curiosity behind them. In any case, she was dressed in simple, unadorned leather armour; her face was mostly hidden in the shadow cast by the plain bronze helmet's browguard. Even her horses were a local breed, sturdy and placid, much smaller than the Malazan warhorses with which she was most familiar, but a comforting ride none the less. It seemed unlikely that she would have attracted undue attention. More than one unemployed mercenary had left Pale since the Empire's arrival.

The south horizon was a jagged line of snow-capped mountains. The Tahlyn Mountains would remain on her right for some time, before the Rhivi Plain swept past them and became the Catlin Plain. Few farms broke the flatlands around her, and those that did crowded the city's own lands. The Rhivi people were not tolerant of such encroachments, and since every trade route that led to and from Pale crossed their traditional territory, those of the city wisely refrained from angering the Rhivi.

Ahead, as she walked her horses, the dawn showed its face with a streak of crimson. The rain had passed a few days back, and the sky overhead was silver-blue and clear, a few stars dwindling as light came to the world.

The day promised to be hot. The Adjunct loosened the leather thongs between her breasts, revealing the fine mail hauberk beneath. By midday she would reach the first well-spring, where she would replenish her supply of water. She ran a hand across the surface of one of the bladders strapped to her saddle. It came away wet with condensation. She passed her hand across her lips.

The voice that spoke beside her jolted her in the saddle and her mount snorted in fear and sidestepped.

'I will walk with you,' Onos T'oolan said, 'for a time.'

Lorn glared at the T'lan Imass. 'I would rather you announced your arrival,' she said tightly, 'from a distance.'

'As you wish.' Onos T'oolan sank into the ground like so much dust.

The Adjunct cursed. Then she saw him waiting a hundred yards ahead of her, back-lit by the rising sun. The crimson sky seemed to have cast a red flame about the warrior. The effect jangled her nerves, as if she looked upon a scene that touched her deepest, oldest memories – memories that went beyond her own life. The T'lan Imass stood unmoving until she reached him, then fell into step beside her.

Lorn tightened her knees about the horse's shoulders and closed the reins until the mare settled down. 'Do you have to be so literal-minded, Tool?' she asked.

The desiccated warrior seemed to consider, then nodded. 'I accept that name. All of my history is dead. Existence begins anew, and with it shall be a new name. It is suitable.'

'Why were you selected to accompany me?' the Adjunct asked.

'In the lands west and north of Seven Cities, I alone among my clan survived the Twenty-eighth Jaghut War.'

Lorn's eyes widened. 'I thought those wars numbered twenty-seven,' she said quietly. 'When your legions left us after conquering Seven Cities, and you marched into the wastelands—'

'Our Bone Casters sensed an enclave of surviving Jaghut,' Tool said. 'Our commander Logros T'lan determined that we exterminate them. Thus we did.'

'Which explains your decimated numbers upon returning,' Lorn said. 'You could have explained your decision to the Empress. As it was, she was left without her most powerful army, and no knowledge of when it might return.'

'Return was not guaranteed, Adjunct,' Tool said.

Lorn stared at the tattered creature. 'I see.'

'The cessation of my clan's chieftain, Kig Aven, was accompanied by all my kin. Thus alone, I am unbound to Logro. Kig Aven's Bone Caster was Kilava Onass, who has been lost since long before the Emperor reawakened us.'

Lorn's mind raced. Among the Malazan Empire, the T'lan Imass were also known as the Silent Host. She'd never known an Imass as loquacious as this Tool. Perhaps it had something to do with this 'unbounding'. Within the Imass, only Commander Logros ever spoke to humans on a regular basis. As for the Bone *Casters* – Imass shamans – they stayed out of sight. The only one that had ever appeared was one named Olar Ethil, who stood alongside the clan chieftain Eitholos Ilm during the battle of Kartool, which had seen an exchange of sorcery that made Moon's Spawn look like a child's cantrip.

In any case, she'd already learned more of the Imass from this brief conversation with Tool than was present in the Empire Annals. The Emperor had known more, much more, but making records of such knowledge had never been his style. That he had reawakened the Imass had been a theory argued among scholars for years. And now she knew it to be true. How many other secrets would this T'lan Imass reveal in casual conversation?

'Tool,' she said, 'had you ever met the Emperor personally?'

'I awakened before Galad Ketan and after Onak Shendok and, as with all the T'lan Imass, I knelt before the Emperor as he sat upon the First Throne.'

'The Emperor was alone?' Lorn asked.

'No. He was accompanied by the one named Dancer.'

'Damn,' she hissed. Dancer had died beside the Emperor. 'Where is this First Throne, Tool?'

The warrior was silent for a time, then it said, 'Upon the Emperor's death the Logros T'lan Imass gathered minds – a rare thing that was last done before the Diaspora – and a binding resulted. Adjunct, the answer to your question is within this binding. I cannot satisfy you. This holds for all Logros T'lan Imass and for all Kron T'lan Imass.'

'Who are the Kron?'

'They are coming,' Tool replied.

Sudden sweat sprang out on the Adjunct's brow. Logros' legions, when they first arrived on the scene, numbered around nineteen thousand. They were believed now to number fourteen thousand, and the majority of those losses had come beyond the Empire's borders, in this last Jaghut War. Were another nineteen thousand Imass about to arrive? What had the Emperor unleashed?

'Tool,' she asked slowly, almost regretting her need to persist in questioning him, 'what is the significance of these Kron coming?'

'The Year of the Three Hundredth Millennium approaches,' the warrior replied.

'What happens then?'

'Adjunct, the Diaspora ends.'

The Great Raven called Crone rode the high winds above Rhivi Plain. The northern horizon was now a green-tinged curve, growing more substantial with every hour of flight. Weariness weighed down her wings, but the

heaven's breath was a strong one. And more, nothing could assail her certainty that changes were coming to this world, and she drew again and again upon her vast reserves of magical power.

If ever there was a dire convergence of great forces, it was now, and in this place. The gods were descending to the mortal soil to do battle, shapings were being forged of flesh and bone, and the blood of sorcery now boiled with a madness born of inevitable momentum. Crone had never felt more alive.

With these unveiling of powers, heads had turned. And to one Crone flew in answer to a summons she was powerless to ignore. Lord Anomander Rake was not her only master, and for her this only made things more interesting. As for her own ambitions, she would keep them to herself. For now, knowledge was her power.

And if there was one secret more alluring than any other she might covet, it was the mystery surrounding the half human warrior called Caladan Brood. Anticipation lifted Crone's wings with renewed strength.

Steadily, Blackdog Forest spread its verdant cloak over the north.

CHAPTER TEN

Kallor said: 'I walked this land when the T'lan Imass were but children. I have commanded armies a hundred thousand strong. I have spread the fire of my wrath across entire continents, and sat alone upon tall thrones. Do you grasp the meaning of this?'

'Yes,' said Caladan Brood, 'you never learn.'

Conversations of War

(Second in Command Kallor speaking with Warlord Caladan Brood), recorded by Outrider Hurlochel, 6th Army

Vimkaros Inn stood just beyond Eltrosan Square in the opal Quarter of Pale. That much Toc knew from his wanderings through the city. But for the life of him he could not think of anyone staying there whom he knew. Yet the instructions for this mysterious meeting had been clear.

He now approached the ostentatious structure warily. He saw nothing suspicious. The square was crowded with the usual gentry and merchant shops; of Malazan guards there were few. The culling of the nobility had done much to cloak Pale's atmosphere with a shocked stillness that hung about people like invisible yokes.

The past few days Toc had kept much to himself, carousing with his fellow soldiers when the mood took him, though those times seemed rarer these days. With the Adjunct gone, and Tattersail reported missing, Dujek and Tayschrenn were involved in mutually exclusive responsibilities. The

High Fist was busy restructuring Pale, and his newly formed 5th Army; while the High Mage sought Tattersail, evidently without much success.

Toc suspected that the peace between the two men would not last. Since the dinner, he had stayed away from anything official, choosing to eat with his comrades rather than dine with the officers as was now his privilege as ranking Claw. The less noticed he made himself the better, as far as he was concerned.

He entered Vimkaros Inn and paused. Before him was a roofless courtyard with paths winding among a rich garden. Clearly, the inn had survived the siege unscathed. A wide central path led directly to a broad counter behind which stood a corpulent old man eating grapes. A few guests walked the side paths, moving among the plants and conversing in low tones.

The message had insisted he come dressed in local garb. Thus, Toc drew little attention as he strode to the counter.

The old man paused in his snacking and bowed with his head. 'At your service, sir,' he said, wiping his hands.

'I believe a table has been reserved in my name,' Toc said. 'I am Render Kan.'

The old man studied a wax tablet before him, then looked up with a smile. 'Of course. Follow me.'

A minute later Toc sat at a table on a balcony overlooking the garden court. His only company was a decanter of chilled Saltoan wine, which arrived when he did, and he now sipped from a goblet, his lone eye surveying the people in the garden below.

A servant arrived and bowed before him. 'Kind sir,' the man said, 'I am to deliver the following message. A gentleman will soon join you who has been out of his depth yet not aware of it. He is, now.'

Toc frowned. 'That's the message?'

'It is.'

'His own words?'

'And yours, sir.' The servant bowed again and departed.

Toe's frown deepened, then he sat forward, his every muscle tensing. He turned to the balcony's entrance in time to see Captain Paran stride through. He was dressed in the manner of the local gentry, unarmed, and looking quite fit. Toc rose, grinning.

'Not unduly shocked, I hope,' Paran said, as he arrived. They sat down and the captain poured himself some wine. 'Did the message prepare you?'

'Barely,' Toc replied. 'I'm not sure how to receive you, Captain. Is this according to the Adjunct's instructions?'

'She believes me dead,' Paran said, his brow wrinkling. 'And I was, for a time. Tell me, Toc the Younger, am I speaking to a Claw, or to a soldier of the Second?'

Toe's eye narrowed. 'That's a tough question.'

'Is it?' Paran asked, his gaze intense and unwavering.

Toc hesitated, then grinned again. 'Hood's Breath, no, it damn well isn't! All right, Captain, welcome to the defunct Second, then.'

Paran laughed, clearly relieved.

'Now what's all this about you being dead but not dead, Captain?'

Paran's humour vanished. He took a mouthful of wine and swallowed, looking away. 'An attempted assassination,' he explained, grimacing. 'I should have died, if not for Mallet and Tattersail.'

'What? Whiskeyjack's healer and the sorceress?'

Paran nodded. 'I've been recovering until recently in Tattersail's quarters. Whiskeyjack's instructions were to keep my existence secret for the time being. Toc,' he leaned forward, 'what do you know of the Adjunct's plans?'

Toc examined the garden below. Tattersail had known – she'd managed to keep it from everyone at the dinner. Remarkable. 'Now,' he said quietly, 'you

ask questions of a Claw.'

'I do.'

'Where's Tattersail?' Toc swung his gaze to the captain and held the man's eyes.

The captain jerked his head. 'Very well. She travels overland – to Darujhistan. She knows a T'lan Imass accompanies the Adjunct, and she believes Lorn's plan includes killing Whiskeyjack and his squad. I do not agree. My role in the mission was to keep an eye on one member of the sergeant's squad, and that person was to be the only one to die. She gave me the command after three years of service to her – it's a reward, and I can't believe she would take it from me. There, that is what I know. Can you help me, Toc?'

'The Adjunct's mission,' Toc said, after releasing a long breath, 'as far as I'm aware of it, involves far more than just killing Sorry. The T'lan Imass is with her for something else. Captain,' Toe's expression was grim, 'the days of the Bridgeburners are numbered. Whiskeyjack's name is damn near sacred among Dujek's men. This is something of which I couldn't convince the Adjunct – in fact she seems to think the opposite – but if the sergeant and the Bridgeburners are eliminated, this army won't be pulled back in line, it will mutiny. And the Malazan Empire will be up against High Fist Dujek with not a single commander who can match him. The Genabackan Campaign will disintegrate, and civil war may well sweep into the heart of the Empire.'

The blood had drained from Paran's face. 'I believe you,' he said. 'Very well, you've taken my doubts and made of them convictions. And they leave me with but one choice.'

'And that is?'

Paran turned the empty goblet in his hands. 'Darujhistan,' he said. 'With luck I'll catch Tattersail, and together we'll attempt to contact Whiskeyjack before the Adjunct does.' He glanced at Toc. 'Evidently the Adjunct can no longer sense my whereabouts. Tattersail forbade me to accompany her, arguing that Lorn would be able to detect me, but she also let slip that my

"death" had severed the bonds between me and the Adjunct. I should have made the connection sooner, but she ... distracted me.'

Into Toc's mind returned the memory of how she'd looked that evening, and he nodded knowingly. 'I'm sure she did.'

Paran sighed. 'Yes, well. In any case, I need at least three horses, and supplies. The Adjunct is proceeding on some kind of timetable. I know that much. So she's not travelling with much haste. I should catch up with Tattersail in a day or two, then together we can drive hard to the edge of the Tahlyn Mountains, skirt them and slip past the Adjunct.'

Toc had leaned back during Paran's elaboration of his plan, a half-smile on his lips. 'You'll need Wickan horses, Captain, since what you've described requires mounts superior to those the Adjunct's riding. Now, how do you plan to get past the city gates dressed as a local but leading Empire horses?'

Paran blinked.

Toc grinned. 'I've got your answer, Captain.' He spread his hands. 'I'll go with you. Leave the horses and supplies to me, and I guarantee we'll get out of the city unnoticed.'

'But—'

'Those are my conditions, Captain.'

Paran coughed. 'Very well. And now that I think on it, the company would be welcome.'

'Good,' Toc grunted. He reached for the decanter. 'Let's drink on the damn thing, then.'

The way was becoming more and more difficult, and Tattersail felt her first tremor of fear. She travelled a Warren of High Thyr and not even Tayschrenn possessed the ability to assail it, yet under attack it was. Not directly. The power that opposed her was pervasive, and it deadened her sorcery.

The Warren had become narrow, choked with obstacles. At times it shuddered around her, the dark walls to either side writhing as if under tremendous pressure. And within the tunnel she struggled to shape, the air stank of something she had difficulty identifying. There was a tinge of sour brimstone and a mustiness that reminded her of unearthed tombs. It seemed to drain the power from her with every breath she took.

She realized that she could not continue. She would have to enter the physical world and find rest. Once again she cursed her own carelessness. She had forgotten her Deck of Dragons. With them she would have known what to expect. She entertained once again the suspicion that an outside force had acted upon her, severing her from the Deck. The first distraction had come from Captain Paran, and while it had been pleasant, she reminded herself that Paran belonged to Oponn. After that, she'd experienced an unaccountable urgency to be on her way, so much so that she'd left everything behind.

Bereft of her Warren, she would find herself alone on the Rhivi Plain, without food, without even a bedroll. The mindless need for haste she'd experienced ran contrary to her every instinct. She was growing certain that it had been imposed upon her, that somehow she'd let her defences down, left herself exposed to such manipulations. And that returned her thoughts to Captain Paran, to the servant of Oponn's will.

Finally, she could go no further. She began to withdraw her strained power, collapsing the Warren layer by layer about her. The ground beneath her boots became solid, cloaked in spar yellow grass, and the air around her shifted into the dull lavender of dusk. A wind brushed her face smelling of soil. The horizon steadied itself on all sides – far off to her right the sun still bathed the Talhyn Mountains, the peaks glittering like gold – and immediately ahead rose an enormous silhouetted figure, turning to face her and voicing a surprised grunt.

Tattersail stepped back in alarm, and the voice that emerged from the figure pushed the air from her lungs in a whooshing breath of relief, then terror.

'Tattersail,' Bellurdan said sadly, 'Tayschrenn did not expect you'd manage to come this far. Thus, I was anticipating detecting you from a distance.' The Thelomen giant lifted his arms in an expansive, child-like shrug. At his feet was a familiar burlap sack, though the body within had shrunk since she'd last seen it.

'How has the High Mage managed to deny my Warren?' she asked. On the heels of her terror had come weariness, almost resignation.

'He could not do that,' Bellurdan answered. 'He simply anticipated that you would attempt to travel to Darujhistan, and as your Thyr Warren cannot function over water, he concluded you would take this path.'

'Then what happened with my Warren?'

Bellurdan grunted distastefully. 'The T'lan Imass who accompanies the Adjunct has created around them a dead space. Our sorcery is devoured by the warrior's Eldering powers. The effect is cumulative. If you were to open your Warren entirely, you would be consumed utterly, Tattersail.' The Thelomen stepped forward. 'The High Mage has instructed me to arrest you and return you to him.'

'And if I resist?'

Bellurdan answered, in a tone filled with sorrow, 'Then I am to kill you.'

'I see.' Tattersail thought for a time. Her world seemed to have closed in now, her every memory irrelevant and discarded. Her heart pounded like a thundering drum in her chest. All that remained of her past, and her only true sense of her life, was regret – an unspecified, yet overwhelming regret. She looked up at the Thelomen, compassion brimming in her eyes. 'So where are this T'lan and the Adjunct, then?'

'Perhaps eight hours to the east. The Imass is not even aware of us. The time for conversation is ended, Tattersail. Will you accompany me?'

Her mouth dry, she said, 'I did not think you one to betray a long-standing friend.'

Bellurdan spread his hands wider and said, in a pained voice, 'I will never betray you, Tattersail. The High Mage commands both of us. How can there be betrayal?'

'Not that,' Tattersail replied quickly. 'I once asked if I could speak with you at length. Remember? You said yes, Bellurdan. Yet now you tell me conversation is ended. I had not imagined your word to be so worthless.'

In the dying light it was impossible to see the Thelomen's face, but the anguish in his tone was plain. 'I am sorry, Tattersail. You are correct. I gave you my word that we would speak again. Can we not do this while we return to Pale?'

'No,' Tattersail snapped. 'I wish it now.'

Bellurdan bowed his head. 'Very well.'

Tattersail forced the tension from her shoulders and neck. 'I have some questions,' she said. 'First, Tayschrenn sent you to Genabaris for a time, didn't he? You were searching through some scrolls for him?'

'Yes.'

'May I ask what were those scrolls?'

'Is it of vital significance now, Tattersail?'

'It is. The truth will help me in deciding whether to go with you, or die here.'

Bellurdan hesitated only a moment. 'Very well. Among the archives collected from the city's mages – all of whom were executed, as you know – were found some copied fragments of *Gothos' Folly*, an ancient Jaghut tome —'

'I know of it,' Tattersail interjected. 'Go on.'

'As a Thelomen, I possess Jaghut blood, though of course Gothos would deny it. The High Mage entrusted the examination of these writings to me. I was to seek out information concerning the burial of a Jaghut Tyrant, a burial that was in fact a prison.'

'Wait,' Tattersail said, shaking her head. 'The Jaghut had no government. What do you mean by a Tyrant?'

'One whose blood was poisoned by the ambition to rule over others. This Jaghut Tyrant enslaved the land around it – all living things – for close to three thousand years. The Imass of the time sought to destroy it, and failed. It was left to other Jaghut to attend to the sundering and imprisoning of the Tyrant – for such a creature was as abominable to them as it was to Imass.'

Tattersail's heart now hammered in her chest. 'Bellurdan.' She had to fight to push the words from her. 'Where was this Tyrant buried?'

'I concluded that the barrow lies south of here, in the Gadrobi Hills directly east of Darujhistan.'

'Oh, Queen of Dreams. Bellurdan, do you know what you've done?'

'I have done as I was commanded by our High Mage.'

'And that's why the T'lan Imass is with the Adjunct.'

'I don't understand what you are saying, Tattersail.'

'Dammit, you brainless ox!' she rasped. 'They plan to free the Tyrant! Lorn's sword – her Otataral sword—'

'No,' Bellurdan rumbled. 'They would not do such a thing. Rather, they seek to prevent someone else releasing it. Yes, that is more likely. It is the truth of things. Now, Tattersail, our conversation is done.'

'I can't go back,' the sorceress said. 'I must go on. Please, don't stop me.'

'We are to return to Pale,' Bellurdan said stubbornly. 'Your concern has been satisfied. Permit me to take you back so that I may continue seeking the proper burial place for Nightchill.'

There was no choice left in Tattersail's mind, but there had to be a way out. The conversation had bought her time, time to recover from the ordeal of travelling by Warren. Bellurdan's words returned to her: if she accessed her Thyr Warren now she would be consumed. Incinerated by the reactive influence of the T'lan Imass. Her eyes fell on the burlap sack beside the

Thelomen and saw from it a faint gleam of sorcery. A spell. My *own* spell. She recalled now: a gesture of compassion, a spell of... preservation. Is *this my way out? Hood's Breath, is it even possible?* She thought of Hairlock, the journey from the dying body to a lifeless ... vessel. *Shedenul, have mercy on us ...*

The sorceress stepped back and opened her Warren. High Thyr magic blazed around her. She saw Bellurdan stagger back then steady himself. He screamed something, but she could not hear him. Then he charged at her.

She regretted the Thelomen's fatal courage as the fire blackened the world around her, even as she opened her arms and embraced him.

Lorn strode to Tool's side. The T'lan Imass faced west, and a tension swirled about him that she could almost see.

'What is it?' she asked, her eyes on the white fountain of fire rising above the horizon. 'I've never seen anything like that.'

'Nor I,' Tool replied. 'It is within the barrier I have cast around us.'

'But that's impossible,' the Adjunct snapped.

'Yes, impossible to last this long. Its source should have been consumed almost instantly. Yet...' The T'lan Imass fell silent.

There was no need for Tool to finish his sentence. The pillar of fire still raged in the night sky as it had for the past hour. The stars swam in the inky darkness around it, magic swirling in a frenzy as if from a bottomless well. On the wind was a smell that left Lorn slightly nauseous. 'Do you recognize the Warren, Tool?'

'Warrens, Adjunct. Tellann, Thyr, Denul, D'riss, Tennes, Thelomen Toblakai, Starvald Demelain ...'

'Starvald Demelain, what in Hood's Name is that?'

'Elder.'

'I thought there were but three Elder Warrens, and that's not one of them.'

'Three? No, there were many, Adjunct, all born of one. Starvald Demelain.'

Lorn wrapped her cloak tighter about herself, eyes on the column of fire. 'Who could manage such a conjuring?'

'There was one ... once. Of worshippers there are none left, so he is no more. I have no answer to your question, Adjunct.' The Imass staggered as the pillar bloomed outwards, then winked out. A distant thundering rumble reached them.

'Gone,' Lorn whispered.

'Destroyed,' Tool said. The warrior cocked his head. 'Strange, the source is indeed destroyed. But something has also been born. I sense it, a new presence.'

Lorn checked her sword. 'What is it?' she demanded.

Tool shrugged. 'New. It flees.'

Was this cause for worry? Lorn scowled and turned to the T'lan Imass, but he had already left her side, and was now striding back to their campfire. The Adjunct glanced once more at the western horizon. There was a cloud, blotting out the stars. It looked huge. She shivered.

It was time to sleep. The Imass would stand guard, so she need not worry about surprise visitors. The day had been long, and she'd over-rationed her water; she felt weak, an unfamiliar sensation. Her scowl deepened as she walked to the camp. Tool, standing immobile beside the flames, reminded her of his arrival two days ago. The fiery glimmer that jumped along his withered flesh-and-bone helm once again triggered some-thing primordial in her mind, and with it came a deep, unreasoning fear of darkness. She stepped close to the Imass. 'Fire is life,' she whispered, the phrase seeming to rise from the depths of instinct.

Tool nodded. 'Life is fire,' he said. 'With such words was born the First Empire. The Empire of Imass, the Empire of Humanity.' The warrior turned to the Adjunct. 'You've done well, my child.'

The grey pall of smoke hung unmoving over Blackdog Forest a dozen leagues north of her as Crone dipped her splayed tail and sank wearily towards the army encamped on the Rhivi Plain.

The tents marched outward like spokes from a central fortified hub where stood a large canopy, rippling in the morning breeze. Towards this centre the Great Raven descended. Her sharp gaze marked Rhivi plainsmen moving among the aisles. Off on the eastern rim fluttered the banners of the Catlin Horse, green and silver to mark the mercenary contingent of Caladan Brood's main army. By far the greatest proportion of soldiers, however, were Tiste Andii – Anomander Rake's people, dwellers of the city within Moon's Spawn – their tall, dark-clad forms moving like shadows between the tents.

Wheeled tracks led north to the forest fringes: supply routes to entrenchments once held by the Malazans and now marking Brood's front lines. Rhivi-driven carts moved forward an endless stream of supplies, while other wagons, laden with the dead and the wounded, entered the camp in a grim flow.

Crone cackled. Magic bled from the main tent and stained the dusty air with a heavy, turgid magenta, the colour of the D'riss Warren, earth magic. Her wings now felt light and held a youthful spring as she beat the air. 'Ahhh,' Crone sighed, 'magic' Sweeping through the wards and traps, the Great Raven glided over the tent and thrummed rapidly as she dropped outside the entrance.

No guard barred the doorway, which had been left pulled back and tied to a support pole. Crone hopped inside.

With the exception of a small hanging at the far end, behind which squatted an army cot, no other divisions had been made within the tent. In the centre stood a massive table, its surface etched with the contours of the surrounding land. One man stood alone, leaning over it, his back to the doorway. An enormous iron hammer was slung across his broad back;

despite its size and evident weight, it looked almost toy-like against that span of muscle and bone. Power rolled from him in musky waves.

'Delays, delays,' Crone muttered, as she flapped up to land on the tabletop.

Caladan Brood grunted distractedly.

'You sensed the storm of sorcery last night?' she asked.

'Sensed? We could see it. The Rhivi shamans seem somewhat disturbed, but they have no answers. We'll discuss that later, Crone. Now I must think.'

Crone cocked her head at the map. 'The west flank falls back in total disarray. Who commands that Barghast mob?'

Brood asked, 'When did you fly within sight of them?'

'Two days past. I saw but a third of the original force left alive.'

Brood shook his head. 'Jorrick Sharplance, under him five thousand Barghast and seven Blades of the Crimson Guard.'

'Sharplance?' Crone hissed laughter. 'Full of himself, is he?'

'He is, but the Barghast so named him. As I was saying, five legions of Gold Moranth dropped into his lap three days ago. Jorrick retreated under cover of night, and bled off two-thirds of his army east and west – his Barghast have a knack of disappearing where no cover seems possible. Yesterday his panicked mob did an about-face and met the Gold. His Barghast moved in as pincers. Two Moranth legions wiped out, the other three retreating to the forest with half their supplies scattered on the plain.'

Crone cocked her head again. 'Jorrick's plan?'

Brood inclined his head. 'He's Crimson Guard, though the Barghast call him their own. Young, thus fearless.'

The raven studied the map. 'And the east? How holds Fox Pass?'

'Well,' Brood said. 'Mostly Stannis conscripts on the other side – the Malazans are finding them a reluctant ally. We'll see the Crimson Guard's

mettle in twelve months' time, when the next wave of Malazan marines disembark at Nisst.'

'Why not drive northward?' Crone asked. 'Prince K'azz could liberate the Free Cities over the winter.'

'The Prince and I agree on this,' Brood said. 'He stays where he is.'

'Why?' Crone demanded.

Brood grunted. 'Our tactics are our business.'

'Suspicious bastard,' Crone muttered. She hopped along the south edge of the map. 'Your underbelly remains for final grim scrutiny. Naught but Rhivi plainsmen between you and Pale. And now forces walk the plain that even the Rhivi know nothing of – yet you show little concern, warrior. Why is that, Crone wonders?'

'I have been in communication with Prince K'azz and his mages, and with the Barghast and Rhivi shamans. What was born on the plain last night belongs to no one. It is alone, and frightened. Even now the Rhivi have begun the search for it. Concerned? No, not by that. Still, there's much more going on in the south.' Brood straightened.

'Anomander is in the midst of it,' Crone purred. 'Plotting and counter-plotting, scattering broken glass in everyone's path. I've never seen him in a better mood.'

'Enough gossip. You have news for me?'

'Of course, Master.' Crone stretched her wings and sighed. She jabbed her beak at an itch, crunched a flea and gulped it down. 'I know who holds the Spinning Coin.'

'Who?'

'A youth whose bliss is ignorance. The Coin spins and turns a face to all those in his company. They've their own game, but it will converge with greater things, and so Oponn's thin threads reverberate in spheres otherwise immune to the Jesters' influence.'

'What does Rake know?'

'Of this, little. But you well know his dislike of Oponn. He would cut those threads given the opportunity.'

'Idiot,' Brood muttered. He thought for a time, unmoving, like a shaping of stone and iron, while Crone ambled back and forth across the Rhivi Plain, her long, black talons scattering the wooden regiment and division markers like dominoes.

'Without Oponn, Rake's power is presently unmatched,' Brood said. 'He hangs over Darujhistan like a beacon and the Empress is sure to send something against him. Such a battle would—'

'Level Darujhistan,' Crone chirped brightly. 'In flames numbering twelve, so fly the Free Cities, so much ash in the wind.'

'Rake's disdain for everything beneath him has left us stumbling and flat on our faces one time too many,' Brood said. He glanced at Crone and raised a hairless eyebrow. 'You're scattering my armies. Stop it.'

Crone stopped pacing and squatted. 'Once again,' she sighed, 'Caladan Brood the Great Warrior seeks the bloodless way. Rake gets that coin and he'll pull Oponn right in and spit the Lord and Lady on that lovely sword of his. Imagine the chaos that would ensue – a wonderful ripple that could topple gods and deluge realms.' She heard her own excitement and revelled in its blatancy. 'Such fun.'

'Quiet, bird,' Brood said. 'The Coin Bearer needs protection, now that Rake's recalled his mages.'

'But who is there to match the Tiste Andii?' Crone asked. 'Surely you don't intend to leave your campaign here?'

Brood bared his filed teeth in a nasty grin. 'Ha, caught you out, I think. Good. You need taking down a notch or two, Crone. You don't know everything. How does it feel?'

'I'll permit such torture from you, Brood,' Crone squawked, 'only because I respect your temper. Just don't push me too far. Tell me, who around here

can match Rake's mages? This is something I must know. You and your secrets. How can I be a true servant to my master's wishes when he withholds vital information?'

'What do you know of the Crimson Guard?' Brood asked.

'Scant,' Crone replied. 'A company of mercenaries held in high regard among such kind, what of them?'

'Ask Rake's Tiste Andii for their assessment, crow.'

Crone's feathers arched indignantly. 'Crow? I'll not take such insults! I'm leaving. Returning to the Moon, there to devise such a list of foul names for Caladan Brood as to stain the realms!'

'Begone with you, then,' Brood said, smiling. 'You've done well.'

'If only Rake wasn't even more stingy than you,' Crone said, as she hopped towards the doorway, 'my spying skills would be used on you instead of on him.'

Brood spoke. 'One last thing, Crone.'

She stopped at the entrance and cocked her head.

The warrior's attention had returned to the map. 'When you find yourself over the Rhivi Plain far to the south, mark whatever powers you sense active there. But be careful, Crone. Something's brewing, and it stinks.'

Crone's cackle was her only reply, and then she was gone.

Brood stood over his map, thinking hard. He remained un-moving for close to twenty minutes, then he straightened. Stepping outside he searched the sky. Crone was nowhere in sight. He grunted and turned to survey the nearest tents. 'Kallor! Where are you?'

A tall grey man stepped around a tent and walked slowly up to Brood. 'The Gold have bogged down in the forest, Warlord,' he said in a gravelly voice, his ancient, lifeless eyes meeting Brood's. 'A storm comes down from the Laederon Heights. The Moranth's Quorls will be grounded for some time.'

Brood nodded. 'I'm leaving you in charge. Heading to Fox Pass.'

Kallor raised an eyebrow.

Brood stared at him, then said, 'Let's not get too excited. People will start thinking you're not as bored with all this as you make out to be. I'm meeting with Prince K'azz.'

A faint smile quirked Kallor's thin lips. 'What madness has Jorrick Sharplance perpetrated now?'

'None, so far as I'm aware,' Brood answered. 'Ease up on the lad, Kallor. He pulled off the last one. Remember, you were young once, too.'

The old warrior shrugged. 'Jorrick's last success belongs to the Lady of Luck if anything. It surely was not the product of genius.'

'I'll not argue you that one,' Brood said.

'May I ask, what is the reason for speaking with K'azz in person?'

Brood looked around. 'Where's that damn horse of mine, anyway?'

'Probably cowering,' Kallor said drily. 'Word is, his legs have become shorter and stubbier beneath your prodigious self. I remain unconvinced that such a thing is possible, but who can argue with a horse?'

'I need some of the Prince's men,' Brood said, heading off down an aisle. 'To be more precise,' he said, over his shoulder, 'I need the Crimson Guard's Sixth Blade.'

Watching Caladan Brood stride away, Kallor sighed. 'Rake again, is it, Warlord? You'd do better to follow my advice and destroy him. You will rue dismissing my advice, Brood.' His dull eyes followed Brood until he turned a corner and disappeared from sight. 'Consider that my last warning.'

The charred earth crunched under their horses' hoofs. The glance that Toc the Younger threw back over his shoulder was received with a grim nod from Captain Paran. They were nearing the source of last night's column of fire.

As Toc had promised, leaving the city had proved a simple matter; none accosted them, and the gates had been left ajar. Their horses were indeed Wickan-bred, lean and long-limbed; and though their ears flattened and eyes rolled they held to the discipline of their reins.

The still midday air was heavy with the stench of sulphur, and already a fine coat of ash covered the two riders and their horses. Overhead the sun was a bright copper orb. Toc stopped his mount and waited for the captain to arrive.

Paran wiped grimy sweat from his brow and adjusted his helmet. The camail felt heavy on his shoulders as he squinted ahead. They were heading towards the place where the pillar of fire had come from. The night just past had been one of deep fear for Paran: neither he nor Toc had ever witnessed such a conflagration of sorcery. Though they had camped leagues away they had felt the heat pouring from it. Now, as they approached, all Paran could feel was dread.

Neither he nor Toc spoke. Perhaps a hundred yards eastward rose something that looked like a misshapen tree stump, one gnarled, blackened branch reaching skyward. In a perfect circle around it the grassy sward was untouched for perhaps five yards. A dark smudge lay in this unburned area, slightly off to one side.

Paran nudged his mount forward and Toc followed after unslinging and stringing his bow. As Toc caught up with the captain, Paran saw that his companion had nocked an arrow.

The closer they approached the less like a tree the charred thing looked. The limb that reached out from it had familiar lines. Paran's gaze narrowed some more, then he cursed and spurred his horse. He closed the distance quickly, leaving behind a startled Toc.

Arriving, he dismounted and strode up to what he now saw were two bodies, one gigantic. Both had been burned beyond recognition, but Paran held no illusions as to who the other was. *All that come close to me, all that 1 care for* ... 'Tattersail,' he whispered, then fell to his knees.

Toc joined him, but remained in the saddle, standing in the stirrups and scanning the horizon. A minute later he dismounted and walked a slow circle around the embracing bodies, stopping at the dark smudge they'd seen from a distance. He crouched to study it.

Paran raised his head and struggled to keep his eyes on the figures. The limb belonged to the giant. The fire that had consumed them both had blackened the arm for most of its length, but its hand was only slightly scorched. Paran stared at the grasping fingers and wondered what salvation the giant had reached for in its moment of death. The freedom that *is death, a freedom denied me. Damn the gods, damn them all.* Numbed, he was slow to realize that Toc called to him.

It was an effort to rise to his feet. He staggered to where Toc still crouched. On the ground before the man was a torn burlap sack.

'Tracks lead from this,' Toc said shakily, a strange expression on his face. He scratched vigorously at his scar, then rose. 'Heading north-east.'

Paran looked at his companion without comprehension. 'Tracks?'

'Small, like a child's. Only ...'

'Only what?'

The man hugged himself. 'Those feet were mostly bones.' He met the captain's blank stare. 'As if the soles were gone, rotted or burned away – I don't know ... Something horrible has happened here, Captain. I'm glad it's heading away, whatever it is.'

Paran turned back to the two entwined figures. He flinched. One hand reached up to touch his face. 'That's Tattersail,' he said, in a flat voice.

'I know. I'm sorry. The other one is the Thelomen High Mage Bellurdan. It has to be.' Toc looked down at the burlap sack. 'He took leave to come out here and bury Nightchill.' He added quietly, 'I don't think Nightchill needs burying any more.'

'Tayschrenn did this,' Paran said.

Something in the captain's voice brought Toc round.

'Tayschrenn. And the Adjunct. Tattersail was right. They would not have killed her otherwise. Only she didn't die easily, she never took the easy path in anything. Lorn's taken her from me, just like she's taken everything else.'

'Captain ...'

Paran's hand unconsciously gripped the pommel of his sword. 'That heartless bitch has a lot coming to her, and I mean to deliver it.'

'Fine,' Toc growled. 'Just let's be smart about it.'

Paran glared at him. 'Let's get going, Toc the Younger.'

Toc glanced one last time into the north-east. This wasn't over, he told himself, shivering. He winced as a savage, painful itch rose beneath his scar. Though he tried, he found he could not reach through to it. And a formless fire burned behind his empty eye-socket – something he had been experiencing often lately. Muttering, he strode to his horse and climbed into the saddle.

The captain had already swung his own mount and the trailing horse southward. The set of the man's back spoke volumes to Toc the Younger, and he wondered if he hadn't made a mistake in accompanying him. Then he shrugged. 'Well,' he said, to the two charred bodies, as he rode past, 'it's done, ain't it?'

The plain below lay sheathed in darkness. Looking to the west, Crone could still see the setting sun. She rode the highest winds, the air around her bitter cold. The Great Raven had left Caladan Brood's company two days ago. Since then, she'd detected no sign of life in the wastes below. Even the massive herds of Bhederin, which the Rhivi were in the habit of following, had disappeared.

At night, Crone's senses were limited, though it was in such darkness that she could best detect sorcery. As she winged ever southward she scanned the land far below with a hungry eye. Others among her brethren from Moon's Spawn regularly patrolled the plains in service to Anomander Rake.

She'd yet to see one, but it was only a matter of time. When she did, she would ask them if they'd detected any source of magic recently.

Brood was not one to overreact. If something was happening down here that soured his palate, it could be momentous, and she wanted to know of it before anyone else.

Fire flashed in the sky ahead of her, perhaps a league distant. It flared briefly, tinged green and blue, then disappeared. Crone tensed. That had been sorcery, but of a kind she'd never known. As she swept into the area the air washed over her hot and wet, with a charnel stench that reminded her of – she cocked her head – burnt feathers.

A cry sounded ahead, angry and frightened. Crone opened her beak to reply, then shut it again. It had come from one of her kin, she was certain, but for some reason she felt the need to hold her tongue. Then another ball of fire flashed, this time close enough to Crone that she saw what it engulfed: a Great Raven.

Her breath hissed from her beak. In that brief instant of light she'd seen half a dozen more of her brethren wheeling in the sky ahead of her and to the west. She thrummed her wings and angled towards them.

When she could hear their panicked flapping about her on all sides, Crone called out, 'Children! Attend to Crone! The Great Mother has come!'

The ravens voiced relieved cries and closed in around her. They all shrieked at once in an effort to tell her what was happening, but Crone's angry hiss silenced them at once. 'I heard among you Hurtle's voice,' Crone said, 'did I not?'

One male swept near her. 'You did,' he replied. 'I am Hurtle.'

'I've just come from the north, Hurtle. Explain to me what has occurred.'

'Confusion,' Hurtle drawled sarcastically.

Crone cackled. She loved a good joke more than anyone. 'Indeed! Go on, lad!'

'Before dusk Kin Clip detected a flare of sorcery below her on the plain. It was odd, its feel, but clearly a Warren had just opened and something had issued on to the plain. Kin Clip spoke to me of this, then investigated. I shadowed her from above during the descent, and so saw what she saw. Crone, it has come to my mind that once again the art of soul-shifting has been exercised.'

'Eh?'

'Travelling on the ground and having just come from a Warren was a small puppet,' Hurtle explained, 'animate and possessing great power. When this puppet detected Clip he gestured at her and she burst into flames. Since then, the creature has disappeared into its Warren, reappearing only to kill another of us.'

'Why do you remain?' Crone demanded.

Hurtle chuckled. 'We would determine its course, Crone. Thus far, it seems to travel southward.'

'Very well. Now that that's been confirmed, leave and take the others with you. Return to Moon's Spawn and report to our lord.'

'As you command, Crone.' Hurtle dipped a wing and slid off into darkness. His voice called out and was answered by a chorus.

Crone waited. She wanted to be certain that they had all departed the area before doing some investigating on her own. Was this puppet the thing birthed in the pillar of fire? It didn't seem likely. And what kind of sorcery did it employ that no Great Raven could absorb? There was an Eldering taste about this. Soul-shifting was no simple cantrip, and it had never been common among the wizards even when its techniques were known. Too many tales of madness born within the shifting.

Perhaps this puppet had survived from these times. Crone thought about that. Unlikely.

Magic bloomed on the plain below, then faded. A small magical force scampered from the spot, weaving as it ran. There, thought Crone, there lie

the answers to my questions. Destroy my younglings, will you? Would you so easily disdain Crone?

She crooked her wings and dropped. The air whistled around her. She raised a penumbra of protective magic that encapsulated her just as the small figure ceased its march and looked up. Faintly, Crone heard a manic laugh rise up to meet her, then the puppet gestured.

The power that engulfed Crone was immense, far beyond anything she anticipated. Her defences held but she found herself buffeted, as if fists punched her from every direction. She cried out in pain, spinning as she fell. It took all her strength and will to thrust out her battered wings and catch a rising current of air. She voiced an outraged, alarmed shriek as she climbed higher into the night sky. A glance down revealed that the puppet had returned once again to its Warren, for nothing magical was visible.

'Aye.' She sighed. 'What a price to pay for knowledge! Elder Warren indeed, the eldest of them all. Who plays with Chaos? Crone knows naught. All things are gathering, gathering here.' She found another stream of wind and angled south. This was something Anomander Rake must know of, never mind Catadan Brood's instructions that the Tiste Andii lord be kept ignorant of almost everything. Rake was good for more than Brood credited him. 'Destruction, for one.' Crone laughed. 'And death. Good at death!'

She picked up speed, so did not notice the dead smudge on the land below her, nor the woman camped in its centre. There was no magic there to speak of, in any case.

Adjunct Lorn squatted by her bedroll, her eyes scanning the night sky. 'Tool, was all that connected to what we witnessed two nights ago?'

The T'lan Imass shook his head. 'I think not, Adjunct. If anything, this concerns me more. It is sorcery, and it ignores the barrier I have set around us.'

'How?' she asked quietly.

'There is only one possibility, Adjunct. It is Eldering, a lost Warren of ages past, returned to us. Whoever its wielder might be, we must assume it tracks us, with purpose.'

Lorn straightened wearily, then stretched her back, feeling her vertebrae pop. 'Is its flavour Shadowthrone's?'

'No.'

'Then I will not assume it's tracking us, Tool.' She eyed her bedroll.

Tool faced the woman and watched in silence as she prepared to sleep. 'Adjunct,' he said, 'this hunter appears able to penetrate my defences, and thus it may open its Warren's portal directly behind us, once we are found.'

'I've no fear of magic,' Lorn muttered. 'Let me sleep.'

The T'lan Imass fell silent, but he continued staring down at the woman as the hours of night crawled on. Tool moved slightly as dawn lightened the east, then was still again.

Groaning, Lorn rolled on to her back as the sunlight reached her face. She opened her eyes and blinked rapidly, then froze. She slowly raised her head to find the T'lan Imass standing directly above her. And, hovering inches from her throat, was the tip of the warrior's flint sword.

'Success,' Tool said, 'demands discipline, Adjunct. Last night we witnessed an expression of Elder magic, choosing as its target ravens. Ravens, Adjunct, do not fly at night. You might think the combination of my abilities with yours ensures our safety. That is no guarantee, Adjunct.' The T'lan Imass withdrew his weapon and stepped to one side.

Lorn drew a shaky breath. A flaw,' she said, pausing to clear her throat before continuing, 'which I admit to, Tool. Thank you for alerting me to my growing complacency.' She sat up. 'Tell me, doesn't it strike you as odd that this supposedly empty Rhivi Plain should display so much activity?'

'Convergence,' Tool said. 'Power ever draws other power. It is not a complicated thought, yet it escaped us, the Imass.' The ancient warrior swung his head to the Adjunct. 'As it escapes their children. The Jaghut well

understood the danger. Thus they avoided one another, abandoned each other to solitude, and left a civilization to crumble into dust. The Forkrul Assail understood as well, though they chose another path. What is odd, Adjunct, is that of these three founding peoples, it is the Imass whose legacy of ignorance survived the ages.'

Lorn stared at Tool. 'Was that an attempt at humour?' she asked.

The T'lan Imass adjusted his helmet. 'That depends on your mood, Adjunct.'

She climbed to her feet and strode to check her horses. 'You're getting stranger every day, Tool,' she said quietly, more to herself than to the Imass. Into her mind returned the first thing she had seen when she'd opened her eyes – that damned creature and his sword. How long had he stood like that? All night?

The Adjunct paused to test her shoulder tentatively. It was healing quickly. Perhaps the injury had not been as severe as she'd first thought.

As she saddled her horse she chanced to glance at Tool. The warrior stood staring at her. What kind of thoughts would occupy someone who'd lived through three hundred thousand years? Or did the Imass live? Before meeting Tool she had generally thought of them as undead, hence without a soul, the flesh alone animated by some external force. But now she wasn't so sure.

'Tell me, Tool, what dominates your thoughts?'

The Imass shrugged before replying. 'I think of futility, Adjunct.'

'Do all Imass think about futility?'

'No. Few think at all.'

'Why is that?'

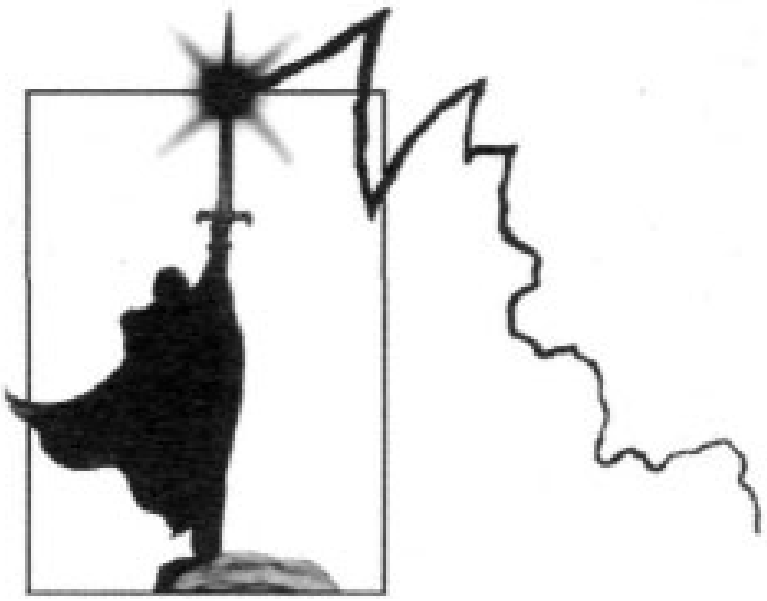
The Imass leaned his head to one side and regarded her. 'Because, Adjunct, it is futile.'

'Let's get going, Tool. We're wasting time.'

'Yes, Adjunct.'

She climbed into the saddle, wondering how the Imass had meant that.

BOOK FOUR



ASSASSINS

I dreamed a coin
with shifting face –
so many youthful visages
so many costly dreams,
and it rolled and rang
'round the gilded rim
of a chalice made for gems

Life of Dreams
Ilbares the Hag

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The night held close
as I wandered
my spirit unfooted
to either earth or stone
unravelled from tree
undriven by iron nail
but like the night itself
a thing of air
stripped of light
so I came upon them,
those masons who cut and carved
stone in the night
sighting by stars and battered hand.
'What of the sun?' asked I of them.
'Is not its cloak of revelation
the warmth of reason
in your shaping?'
And one among them answered,
'No soul can withstand
the sun's bones of light
and reason dims
when darkness falls –
so we shape barrows in the night
for you and your kin.'
'Forgive my interruption, then,' said I.
'The dead never interrupt,' said the mason,
'they but arrive.'

Pauper's Stone
Darujhistan

'Yet another night, yet another dream,' Kruppe moaned, 'with naught but a scant fire to keep this wanderer company.' He held his hands over the flickering, undying hearth that had been stoked by an Elder God. It seemed an odd gift, but he sensed a significance to it. 'Kruppe would understand this meaning, for rare and unwelcome is this frustration.'

The landscape around him was barren; even the ploughed earth was gone, with no sign of habitation in sight. He squatted by the lone fire in a tundra wasteland, and the air had the breath of rotting ice. To the north and to the east the horizon gleamed green, almost luminescent though no moon had risen to challenge the stars. Kruppe had never before seen such a thing, yet it was an image fashioned within his mind. 'Disturbing, indeed, proclaims Kruppe. Are these visions of instinct, then, unfurled in this dream for a purpose? Kruppe knows not, and would return to his warm bed this instant, were the choice his.'

He stared about at the lichen- and moss-covered ground, frowning at the strange bright colours born there. He'd heard tales of Redspire Plain, that land far to the north, beyond the Laederon Plateau. Is this what tundra looked like? He'd always pictured a bleak, colourless world. 'Yet peruse these stars overhead. They glisten with a youthful energy, nay, sparkle as if amused by the one who contemplates them. While the earth itself hints of vast blushes of red, orange and lavender.'

Kruppe rose as low thunder reached him from the west. In the distance moved a massive herd of brown-furred beasts. The steam of their breath gusted silver in the air above and behind them as they ran, turning as one this way and that but ever at a distance. He watched them for some time. When they came closest to him he saw the reddish streaks in their fur, and their horns, sweeping down then up and out. The land shook with their passage.

'Such is the life in this world, Kruppe wonders. Has he travelled back, then, to the very beginning of things?'

'You have,' said a deep voice behind him.

Kruppe turned. 'Ah, come to share my fire, of course.' He saw before him a squat figure, covered in the tanned hides of deer or some such similar animal. Antlers stretched out from a flat skull-cap on the man's head, grey and covered in fuzzy skin. Kruppe bowed. 'You see before you Kruppe, of Darujhistan.'

'I am Pran Chole of Cannig Tol's Clan among the Kron Tlan.' Pran stepped close and crouched before the fire. 'I am also the White Fox, Kruppe, wise in the ways of ice.' He glanced at Kruppe and smiled.

Pran's face was wide, the bones pronounced beneath smooth," gold skin. His eyes were barely visible between tight lids, but what Kruppe saw of them was a startling amber in colour. Pran reached out long, supple hands over the fire. 'Fire is life, and life is fire. The age of ice passes, Kruppe. Long have we lived here, hunting the great herds, gathering to war with the Jaghut in the southlands, birthing and dying with the ebb and flow of the frozen rivers.'

'Kruppe has travelled far, then.'

'To the beginning and to the end. My kind give way to your kind, Kruppe, though the wars do not cease. What we shall give to you is freedom from such wars. The Jaghut dwindle, ever retreat into forbidding places. The Forkrul Assail have vanished, though we never found need to fight them. And the K'chain Che'Malle are no more – the ice spoke to them with words of death.' Pran's gaze swung back to the fire. 'Our hunting has brought death to the great herds, Kruppe. We are driven south, and this must not be. We are the Tlan, but soon the Gathering comes, and so shall be voiced the Rite of Imass and the Choosing of the Bone Casters, and then shall come the sundering of flesh, of time itself. With the Gathering shall be born the T'lan Imass, and the First Empire.'

'Why, Kruppe wonders, is he here?'

Pran Chole shrugged. 'I have come for I have been called. By whom, I know not. Perhaps it is the same with you.'

'But Kruppe is dreaming. This is Kruppe's dream.'

'Then I am honoured.' Pran straightened. 'One of your time comes. Perhaps this one possesses the answers we seek.'

Kruppe followed Pran's gaze to the south. He raised an eyebrow. 'If not mistaken, then Kruppe recognizes her as a Rhivi.'

The woman who approached was perhaps middle-aged, heavy with child. Her dark, round face bore features similar to Pran Chole's, though less pronounced. Fear shone in her eyes, yet there was a grim determination about her as well. She reached the fire and eyed the two men, most of her attention drawing to Pran Chole. 'Tlan,' she said, 'the Tellann Warren of the Imass of our time has birthed a child in a confluence of sorceries. Its soul wanders lost. Its flesh is an abomination. A shifting must take place.' She turned to Kruppe and swept back the thick woven robe she wore, revealing her swelled stomach. The bare, stretched skin had been recently traced in a tattoo. The image was that of a white-haired fox. 'The Elder God walks again, risen from blood spilled on consecrated stone. K'rul came in answer to the child's need and now aids us in our quest. He apologizes to you, Kruppe, for using the world within your dream, but no younger god can influence this place. Somehow you have made your soul immune to them.'

'The rewards of cynicism,' Kruppe said, bowing.

The woman smiled.

'I understand,' Pran Chole said. 'You would make of this child, born of Imass powers, a Soletaken.'

'Yes. It is the best we can manage, Tlan. A shapeshifter – which we too know as Soletaken – must be fashioned.'

Kruppe cleared his throat. 'Excuse Kruppe, please. But are we not missing someone vital to these plans?'

'She strides two worlds,' the Rhivi said. 'K'rul guides her now into yours. She is frightened still. It falls to you, Kruppe, to welcome her.'

Kruppe adjusted the sleeves of his faded, threadbare cloak. 'This should not prove difficult for one of Kruppe's charms.'

'Perhaps,' the Rhivi said, frowning. 'Her flesh is an abomination. You have been warned.'

Kruppe nodded affably, then looked around. 'Will any direction do?'

Pran Chole laughed.

'I suggest south,' the Rhivi said.

He shrugged and, with a bow to the two companions, he headed south. After a few minutes he glanced back, but the fire was nowhere in sight. He was alone in the chill night.

A full moon appeared on the eastern horizon, bathing the land in silver light. Ahead, the tundra rolled on as far as Kruppe could see, flat and featureless. Then he squinted. Something had just appeared, still distant, walking with seeming great difficulty. He watched it fall once, then climb back to its feet. Despite the luminescence, the figure looked black.

Kruppe moved forward. It had yet to see him, and he stopped when he was but thirty feet away. The Rhivi had been right. Kruppe produced his silk handkerchief and wiped the sweat that had sprung across his brow. The figure had been a woman once, tall, with long black hair. But that woman had been long dead. Her flesh had withered and assumed the hue of dark wood. Perhaps the most horrific aspect of her was her limbs, which had been roughly sewn back on to her body. 'Aye,' Kruppe whispered. This woman had been torn apart once.

The woman's head flew up and sightless eyes fixed upon Kruppe. She stopped, her mouth opening but no words coming forth.

Surreptitiously, Kruppe cast a spell upon himself, then looked at her yet again. He frowned. A spell had been woven about the woman, one of preservation. But something had happened to that spell, something had reshaped it. 'Lass!' Kruppe barked. 'I know you can hear me.' He didn't know, but decided to insist in any case. 'Your soul is trapped within a body that is not your own. It does not become you. I am named Kruppe, and I will lead you to succour. Come!' He spun round and began to walk. A moment later he heard a shuffling behind him, and smiled. 'Ah,' he

whispered, 'Kruppe has charms indeed. But more, he can be harsh when necessary.'

The fire had returned, a beacon before them, and Kruppe saw the two figures awaiting them. The vestiges of the spell he had cast upon himself made the Tlan and the Rhivi blinding to his eyes, such was their power. Kruppe and the woman arrived.

Pran Chole stepped forward. 'Thank you, Kruppe.' He studied the woman and nodded slowly. 'Yes, I see the effects of the Imass upon her. But there is more.' He looked to the Rhivi. 'She was a mage once?'

The Rhivi moved close to the woman. 'Hear me, lost one. Your name is Tattersail, your sorcery is Thyr. The Warren flows within you now, it animates you, protects you.' She opened her robe once more. 'It is time to bring you back into the world.'

Tattersail stepped back in alarm.

'Within you is the past,' Pran said. 'My world. You know the present, and the Rhivi offers you to the future. In this place all is merged. The flesh you wear has upon it a spell of preservation, and in your dying act you opened your Warren within the influence of Tellann. And now you wander within a mortal's dream. Kruppe is the vessel of change. Permit us to aid you.'

With a wordless cry Tattersail staggered into Pran's arms. The Rhivi quickly joined them.

'My,' Kruppe breathed, 'but Kruppe's dreams have taken a strange turn. While his own concerns are ever present, a haunting voice, once again he must set them aside.'

Suddenly K'rul stood beside him. 'Not so. It is not my way to use you without just recompense.'

Kruppe looked up at the Elder God. 'Kruppe asks for nothing. There is a gift in this, and I am glad to be part of its making.'

K'rul nodded. 'Nevertheless. Speak to me of your efforts.'

'Rallick and Murillio seek to right an old wrong,' Kruppe said, with a sigh. 'They think me ignorant of their schemes, but I shall turn such schemes to my purposes. Guilt rides this decision, but they are needed.'

'Understood. And the Coin Bearer?'

'Protection has been set in motion, though its final shaping is yet to come. I know that the Malazan Empire is present in Darujhistan, covertly for the moment. What they seek—'

'Is anything but clear, Kruppe. Even to them. Use this to your advantage when you find them. Allies might come from surprising quarters. I will tell you this: two now approach the city, one is a T'lan Imass, the other a bane to magic. Their purposes are destructive, but already forces are in play attending to them. Seek knowledge of them, but do not openly oppose them. They are dangerous. Power attracts power, Kruppe. Leave them to the consequences of their actions.'

Kruppe nodded. 'Kruppe is no fool, K'rul. He openly opposes no one, and he finds power a thing to be avoided at all costs.'

As they spoke the Rhivi woman had taken Tattersail in her arms. Pran Chole squatted nearby, his eyes closed and his lips forming silent words. The Rhivi woman rocked the desiccated body in rhythmic motion, chanting softly. Water stained the Rhivi's thighs.

'Aye,' Kruppe whispered. 'She prepares to give birth in truth.'

Abruptly the Rhivi tossed away the body. It crumpled in a lifeless heap.

The Moon now hung immediately overhead, so bright that Kruppe found he could not look at it directly.

The Rhivi had assumed a squatting position, moving with the rhythm of labour, her face sheathed in sweat. Pran Chole remained immobile, though his body was racked in shivering bouts that twisted his face with pain. His eyes opened wide, glowing bright amber, and fixed on the Moon.

'Elder God,' Kruppe said quietly, 'how much will this Tattersail remember of her former life?'

'Unknown,' K'rul replied. 'Soul-shifting is a delicate thing. The woman was consumed in a conflagration. Her soul's first flight was carried on wings of pain and violence. More, she entered another ravaged body, bearing its own traumas. The child that is born will be like no other ever seen. Its life is a mystery, Kruppe.'

Kruppe grunted. 'Considering her parents, she will indeed be exceptional.' A thought came to him and he frowned. 'K'rul, what of the first child within the Rhivi?'

'There was none, Kruppe. The Rhivi woman was prepared in a manner unknown to any man.' He chuckled. 'Including myself.' He raised his head. 'This sorcery belongs to the Moon, Kruppe.'

They continued watching the labours of birth. To Kruppe it seemed they waited more hours in the darkness than any normal night could hold. The Moon remained overhead, as if it found its position to its liking – or, he reconsidered, as if it stood guard over them.

Then a small cry rose into the still air, and the Rhivi lifted in her arms a child furred in silver.

Even as Kruppe watched, the fur sloughed away. The Rhivi turned the child and placed her mouth against its belly. Her jaws bunched and the remaining length of umbilical cord fell away.

Pran Chole strode to stand beside Kruppe and the Elder God. The T'lan looked exhausted. 'The child drew from me power beyond my control,' he said softly.

As the Rhivi squatted again in afterbirth, holding the child against her chest, Kruppe's eyes widened. The mother's belly was smooth, the white fox tattoo was gone.

'I am saddened,' Pran said, 'that I may not return in twenty years to see the woman this child shall become.'

'You shall,' K'rul said in a low tone, 'but not as a T'lan. As a T'lan Imass Bone Caster.'

The breath hissed between Pran's teeth. 'How long?' he asked.

'Three hundred thousand years, Pran Chole of Cannig Tol's Clan.'

Kruppe laid a hand on Pran's arm. 'You've something to look forward to,' he said.

The T'lan stared at Kruppe a moment, then he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

The hours before Kruppe's dream had proved eventful, beginning with his meeting with Baruk that permitted the revelation of the Coin Bearer punctuated with the clever if slightly dramatic suspension of the coin's wax impression – a cantrip that had gone strangely awry.

But soon after the meeting, droplets of now-hardened wax pebbling the breast and arms of his coat, Kruppe paused just outside the alchemist's door. Roald was nowhere to be seen. 'Oh, my,' Kruppe breathed as he wiped sweat from his forehead. 'Why should Master Baruk find Crokus's name familiar? Ah, stupid Kruppe! Uncle Mammot, of course. Oh dear, that was close – all could well have been lost!' He continued on down the hall to the stairs.

For a time there, Oponn's power had waxed considerably. Kruppe smiled at his pun, but it was a distracted smile. He would do well to avoid such contacts. Power had a habit of triggering his own talents; already he felt the urgings of the Deck of Dragons within his head.

He hurried down the stairs and crossed the main hall to the doors. Roald was just entering, burdened beneath mundane supplies. Kruppe noted the dust covering the old man's clothing. 'Dear Roald, you look as if you've just weathered a sandstorm! Do you require Kruppe's assistance?'

'No,' Roald grunted. 'Thank you, Kruppe. I can manage. Will you be so kind as to close the doors on your way out?'

'Of course, kind Roald!' Kruppe patted the man's arm and strode out into the courtyard. The gates leading to the street had been left open, and beyond

was a swirling cloud of dust. 'Ah, yes, the road repairs,' Kruppe muttered.

A headache had burgeoned behind his eyes, and the bright sun overhead wasn't helping matters any. He was half-way to the gates when he stopped. 'The doors! Kruppe has forgotten to close the doors!' He spun round and returned to the estate entrance, sighing as the doors closed with a satisfying click. As he turned away a second time someone shouted in the street beyond. There followed a loud crash, but this latter sound was lost on Kruppe.

With that bellowed curse a sorcerous storm roared into his head. He fell to his knees, then his head snapped up, eyes widening. 'That,' he whispered, 'was indeed a Malazan curse. Then why does House Shadow's image burn like fire in Kruppe's skull? Who now walks the streets of Darujhistan?' A *count of knots unending* ... 'Mysteries solved, more mysteries created.'

The pain had passed. Kruppe climbed to his feet and brushed the dust from his clothing. 'Good that said affliction occurred beyond the eyes of suspicious beings, Kruppe notes with relief. All upon a promise made to friend Roald. Wise old friend Roald. Oponn's breath is this time welcome, though begrudgingly so.'

He strode to the gates and peered into the street. A cart filled with shattered cobbles had toppled. Two men argued incessantly as to whose fault it was while they righted the cart and proceeded to refill it. Kruppe studied them. They spoke well the Daru tongue, but to one who listened carefully there was the hint of an accent – an accent that did not belong. 'Oh, my,' Kruppe said, stepping back. He adjusted his coat, took a deep breath, then opened the gate and walked into the street.

The fat little man with the flopping sleeves walked from the house's gate and turned left. He seemed in a hurry.

Sergeant Whiskeyjack wiped the sweat from his brow with a scarred forearm, his eyes slits against the bright sunlight.

'That is the one, Sergeant,' Sorry said, beside him.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I'm sure.'

Whiskeyjack watched the man winding through the crowd. 'What's so important about him?' he asked.

'I admit,' Sorry replied, 'to some uncertainty as to his significance. But he is vital, Sergeant.'

Whiskeyjack chewed his lip, then turned to the wagon bed where a city map had been laid flat, its corners anchored down by chunks of rock. 'Who lives in that estate?'

'A man named Baruk,' Sorry answered. 'An alchemist.'

He scowled. How did she know that? 'Are you saying that fat little man is this Baruk?'

'No. He works for the alchemist. Not a servant. A spy, perhaps. His skills involve thievery, and he possesses ... talent.'

Whiskeyjack looked up. 'A Seer?'

For some reason Sorry winced. The sergeant watched, bemused, as Sorry's face paled. Damn, he wondered, what on earth is going on with this girl?

'I believe so,' she said, her voice trembling.

Whiskeyjack straightened. 'All right. Follow him.'

She nodded shakily, then slipped into the crowd.

The sergeant rested his back against the wagon's side-wall. His expression soured as he studied his squad. Trotts was swinging his pick as if on a battlefield. Stones flew everywhere. Passers-by ducked, and cursed when ducking failed. Hedge and Fiddler crouched behind a wheelbarrow, flinching each time the Barghast's pick struck the street. Mallet stood a short distance away, directing pedestrians to the other pavement. He no longer bellowed at the people, having lost his voice arguing with an old man with a donkey wobbling under an enormous basket of firewood. The

bundles now lay scattered across the street – the old man and the donkey nowhere to be seen – providing an effective barrier to wheeled vehicles.

All in all, Whiskeyjack concluded, everyone with him had assumed the role of heat-crazed street worker with a facility he found oddly disturbing.

Hedge and Fiddler had acquired the wagon, loaded down with cobbles, less than an hour after their midnight landing at a public dock on the Lakefront. Exactly how this had been accomplished, Whiskeyjack was afraid to ask. But it suited their plans perfectly. Something nagged at the back of Whiskeyjack's mind but he dismissed it. He was a soldier and a soldier followed orders. When the time came, there would be chaos at every major intersection of streets in the city.

'Planting mines ain't gonna be easy,' Fiddler had pointed out, 'so we do it right in front of everyone's nose. Road repair.'

Whiskeyjack shook his head. True to Fiddler's prediction, no one had yet questioned them. They continued ripping up streets and replacing the old cobbles with Moranth munitions encased in fire-hardened clay. Was everything going to be so easy?

His thoughts returned to Sorry. *Not likely.* Quick Ben and Kalam had at last convinced him that their half of the mission was better off without her. She'd tagged along with his crew, eyes never still, but otherwise offering little in the way of assistance. He admitted to feeling some relief that he'd sent her off on that fat man's trail.

But what had pulled a seventeen-year-old girl into the world of war? He couldn't understand it – he couldn't get past her youthfulness, couldn't see beyond to the cold, murderous killer behind those dead eyes. As much as he told his squad that she was as human as any of them, the doubts grew with every question about her that he could not answer. He knew almost nothing about her. The revelation that she could manage a fishing boat had come from seemingly nowhere. And here in Darujhistan she'd hardly acted like a girl raised in a fishing village. There was a natural poise about her, a measure of assurance more common to the higher, educated classes. No matter where she was, she carried herself as if she belonged there.

Did that sound like a seventeen-year-old girl? No, but it seemed to match Quick Ben's assertions, and that galled him. How else to match her with that icy-cold woman torturing prisoners outside Nathilog? He could look at her and part of him would say: 'Young, not displeasing to the eye, a confidence that makes her magnetic' While another part of his mind snapped shut. Young? He'd hear his own harsh, pained laugh. Oh, no, not this lass. She's *old.* She walked under a blood-red moon in the dawn of time, did this one. Her *face is the face of all that cannot be fathomed, and she's looking you in the eye, Whiskeyjack, and you'll never know what she's thinking.*

He could feel sweat drain down his face and neck. Nonsense. That part of his mind lost itself to its own terror. It took the unknown and fashioned, in blind desperation, a visage it could recognize. Despair, he told himself, always demands a direction, a focus. Find the direction and the despair goes away.

Of course, it wasn't that easy. The despair he felt had no shape. It was not just Sorry, not just this endless war, not even the treachery from within the Empire. He had nowhere to look for answers, and he was tired of asking questions.

When he had looked upon Sorry at Greydog, the source of his horror lay in the unveiling of what he was becoming: a killer stripped of remorse, armoured in the cold iron of inhumanity, freed from the necessity to ask questions, to seek answers, to fashion a reasonable life like an island in a sea of slaughter.

In the empty eyes of this child, he'd seen the withering of his own soul. The reflection had been unblemished, with no imperfections to challenge the truth of what he saw.

The sweat running down his back beneath the jerkin felt hot against the chill that gripped him. Whiskeyjack lifted a trembling hand to his forehead. In the days and nights ahead, people would die by his command. He'd been thinking of that as the fruition of his careful, precise planning – success measured by the ratio of the enemy's dead to his own losses. The city – its busy, jostling multitudes unceasing in their lives small and large, cowardly and brave – no more than a game-board, and the game played solely for the

benefit of others. He'd made his plans as if nothing of himself was at stake. And yet his friends might die – there, he'd finally called them what they were – and the friends of others might die, and sons, daughters, parents. The roll-call of shattered lives seemed unending.

Whiskeyjack pressed his back against the side-wall in an effort to steady his reeling mind. Desperately, he lifted his gaze from the street. He saw a man at a window on the second floor of the estate. The man was watching them, and his hands were bright red.

Shaken, the sergeant looked away. He bit into the side of his mouth until he felt a sharp stab of pain, then tasted blood. Concentrate, he told himself. Step back from that chasm. Concentrate, or you'll die. And not just you, but also your squad. They trust you to get them out of this. You've got to keep earning that trust. He drew a deep breath through his nostrils, then turned to one side and spat a mouthful of blood. He stared down at the red-slicked cobble. 'There,' he hissed. 'It's easy to look at it, isn't it?'

He heard footsteps and looked up to see Hedge and Fiddler arrive. Both men wore troubled expressions.

'You all right, Sarge?' Fiddler asked quietly. Behind the two saboteurs, Mallet approached, his gaze calculating and fixed on Whiskeyjack's white, sweat-soaked face.

The sergeant grimaced. 'We're behind schedule. How much longer?'

Their faces smeared with white dust and sweat, the two men looked at each other, then Hedge answered, 'Three hours.'

'We decided on seven mines,' Fiddler said. 'Four Sparkers, two Flamers and one Cusser.'

'Will that bring down some of these buildings?' Whiskeyjack asked, avoiding Mallet's eyes.

'Sure. No better way to block an intersection.' Fiddler grinned at his companion.

'You got one in particular you want dropped?' Hedge enquired.

'The estate behind you is an alchemist's.'

'Right,' Hedge said. 'That should light the sky all right.'

'You've got two and a half hours,' Whiskeyjack said. 'Then it's on to the Majesty Hill crossroads.'

Mallet stepped close. 'Another headache?' he asked softly.

Whiskeyjack closed his eyes, then gave a sharp nod.

The healer raised a hand and passed it over the sergeant's brow. 'Just easing it a little,' he said.

The sergeant grinned ruefully. 'This is getting old, Mallet. You're even using the same words.' A cool numbness flowed through his thoughts.

Mallet's face was drawn. He lowered his hand. 'When we have time I'll find the source, Whiskeyjack.'

'Right.' The sergeant smiled. 'When we have time.'

'Hope Kal and Quick are doing OK,' Mallet said, turning to watch the street traffic. 'You sent Sorry off?'

'Yes. We're on our own. They know where to find us, all three of them.' He glanced up at the estate window. The man with the red hands was still there, though now he was studying the distant rooftops. A cloud of dust rose between them, and Whiskeyjack returned his attention to the city map, where every major intersection, the barracks and Majesty Hill had been circled in red. 'Mallet?'

'Sarge?'
'Bit the inside of my cheek again.'
The healer stepped close, once more raising his hand.

Crokus Younghand strode south on Trallit's Walk. The first signs of the upcoming Gedderone Fête had appeared. Dyed banners hung from clothes-lines over the street, painted flowers and strips of bark framed doorways, and bushels of dried weeds had been tacked to walls at every crossing.

Outlanders already filled the streets, Gadrobi herders, Rhivi traders, Catlin weavers – a mob of sweaty, shouting, excited people. Animal smells mixed with human, making the narrower alleys so redolent as to be almost impassable, which in turn crowded the main thoroughfares even more.

In past years Crokus had revelled in the celebration, pushing through the midnight crowds and filling his own pockets by emptying those around him. During the Fête, worries of the Malazan Empire's exploits in the far north disappeared for a time. His uncle always smiled at that, saying the turn of the season gave the efforts of humanity their proper perspective. 'The mewling, petty acts,' he'd say, 'of a short-lived and shortsighted species, Crokus, can do nothing to mar the Great Cycles of Life.'

As he walked home Mammot's words returned to him now. He had always looked upon his uncle as a wise, if slightly ineffectual, old man. Increasingly, however, he found himself troubled by Mammot's observations.

Celebrating Gedderone's Rite of Spring shouldn't be an excuse to avoid the pressures of reality. It wasn't just a harmless escape: it was a means of delaying the probable and making it inevitable. We could dance in the streets all year long, he scowled to himself, to a thousand Great Cycles, and with the same certainty reserved for the coming and going of seasons the Malazan Empire would march through our gates. They'd end the dance with the edge of a sword, being industrious, disciplined people, impatient with useless expenditures of energy – grimly short-sighted.

He came to a tenement and, nodding at the pipe-smoking old woman sitting on the steps, went inside. The hallway was empty, the usual crowd of children no doubt outside playing in the streets, and a calming domestic murmur drifted out from behind closed doors. He climbed the creaking staircase to the first floor.

Outside Mammot's door the scholar's pet winged monkey hovered, scratching and pulling desperately at the latch. It ignored Crokus until he arrived to push it aside, then it squealed and flew in circles around his head.

'Being a pain again, eh?' Crokus said to the creature, waving a hand as it flew too close and ended up snarled in his hair. Tiny human-like hands gripped his scalp. 'All right, Moby,' he said, relenting, and opened the door.

Inside, Mammot was preparing herbal tea. Without turning he asked, 'Tea, Crokus? And as for that little monster who's probably riding your head, tell him I've had just about enough of him today.'

Moby sniffed indignantly and flapped over to the scholar's desk, where he landed with a belly-flop, scattering papers to the floor. He chirped.

Sighing, Mammot turned with the tray in his hands. His watery eyes fixed on Crokus. 'You look tired, lad.'

Crokus slumped into the less ragged of the two chairs occupying the room. 'Yes. Tired, and in a dark mood.'

'My tea will do its usual wonders,' Mammot said, smiling.

Crokus grunted, not looking up. 'Maybe. Maybe not.'

Mammot stepped forward and laid the tray on a small table between the chairs. He sat down with a soft groan. 'As you know, I possess few moral qualms about your chosen profession, Crokus, since I question rights of any kind, including ownership. Even privileges demand responsibility, as I've always said, and the privilege of ownership demands that the owner be responsible for protecting his or her claim. My only concern, of course, is for risks you must perforce take.' Mammot leaned forward and poured tea. 'Lad, a thief must be sure of one thing – his concentration. Distractions are dangerous.'

Crokus glanced up at his uncle. 'What have you been writing all these years?' he asked suddenly, gesturing at the desk.

Surprised, Mammot picked up his cup and sat back. 'Well! A genuine interest in education, then? Finally? As I've said before, Crokus, you possess the intelligence to go so far. And while I'm but a humble man of letters, my word will open to you many doors in the city. Indeed, even the City Council is not beyond your reach, if you would choose such a

direction. Discipline, lad, the very same requirement you've mastered as a thief.'

A crafty expression glittered in Crokus's gaze as it held on Mammot. 'How long would it take,' he asked quietly, 'to become known in such circles?'

'Well,' said Mammot, 'it is the learning that matters, of course.'

'Of course.' In Crokus's mind, however, there rose the image of a sleeping maiden.

Mammot blew on his drink. 'With full-time studies, and your youthful eagerness, I would hazard a year, perhaps more, perhaps less. Is there a need for haste?'

'Just youthful eagerness, I suppose. In any case, you haven't answered me yet. What are you writing, Uncle?'

'Ah.' Mammot glanced at his desk, raising an eyebrow at Moby, who had opened an inkwell and was drinking from it. 'The history of Darujhistan,' he said. 'I am just beginning the fifth volume, which opens with the reign of Ektalm, second to last of the Tyrant Kings.'

Crokus blinked. 'Who?'

Smiling, Mammot sipped his tea. 'Usurper of Letastte and succeeded by his daughter, Sandenay, who brought on the Rising Time and with it the end of the age of tyrants.'

'Oh, right.'

'Crokus, if you're serious about all this, Darujhistan's history is where we'll begin in the lessons, but that doesn't mean starting at volume five. It means starting at the very beginning.'

Crokus nodded. 'Born on a rumour,' he said.

At the desk Moby squawked, then coughed. Mammot shot him a glance, then swung his attention back to Crokus, expression veiled as he replied,

'Yes, lad. Darujhistan was born on a rumour.' He hesitated. 'You've heard that saying elsewhere? Recently?'

'Someone mentioned it,' Crokus said casually. 'Can't recall who, though.' He could, in fact. It had been spoken by the assassin, Rallick Nom.

'Do you know what it means?'

Crokus shook his head.

Mammot leaned back. 'Drink your tea, my lad.' The old man paused, then began, 'In the Early Cycles in this Realm, three great peoples struggled for dominion, none of them human as we would know human. Bowing out early in the struggle were the Forkrul Assail, or the Krussail as they are now known. Not through weakness, but ... well, disinterest. The remaining two peoples warred endlessly. Eventually one fell, for they were a race of individuals, battling as much among themselves as against their racial enemies. They were called the Jaghut, though the term has degenerated these days to Jhag, or Shurl. While losers in the war, they did not disappear entirely – it's said some Jaghut survive to this day, though, thankfully, not on Genabackis.

'So,' Mammot cupped his hands around his tea-cup, 'Darujhistan was born on a rumour. Among the indigenous Gadrobi hill tribes survived the legend that a Jaghut's barrow lay somewhere in the hills. Now, the Jaghut were possessors of great magic, creators of secret Warrens and items of power. Over time the Gadrobi legend made its way beyond the hills, into the Genabackan north and the Catlin south, to kingdoms since crumbled to dust in the east and west. In any case, searchers came to the hills, at first a trickle then hordes – entire tribes led by power-hungry shamans and warlocks. Every hillside was laced with trenches and bore-holes. From the camps and shanty-towns, from the thousands of treasure-seekers arriving each spring, a city was born.'

'Darujhistan,' Crokus said.

'Yes. The barrow was never found, and the rumour has long since dwindled – few are even aware of it these days, and those who are know better than to resume the search.'

'Why?'

Mammot frowned. 'Rarely does a Jaghut construction appear in the hands of a human, but it has happened, and the consequences have inevitably been catastrophic' The old man's frown deepened. 'The lesson is clear for those who would choose to recognize it.'

Crokus thought for a time. 'So the Krussail vanished, the Jhag were defeated. What happened to the third people, then? The ones who won? Why aren't they here instead of us?'

Mammot opened his mouth to reply, then stopped, reconsidering.

Crokus's eyes narrowed. He wondered what Mammot had been about to reveal, and why he'd chosen not to reveal it.

Mammot set down his cup. 'No one is certain what happened to them, Crokus, or how they became what they are today. They exist, sort of, and are known, to all who have faced the Malazan Empire, as the T'lan Imass.'

Sorry pushed through the crowd, struggling to keep the fat man within sight. It was not that he was difficult to follow, but the girl was struggling against a storm within her head, which had been triggered by a single word uttered by Sergeant Whiskeyjack.

Seer.

It had felt as if a dark, compacted thing in her brain had burst open with that word, and now warred against all that surrounded it. Though it had initially come upon her with a force that seemed almost overwhelming, she could now sense its waning. Whatever it fought was winning the battle. Yet, faintly, she thought she could hear the weeping of a child.

'I am Cotillion,' she heard herself murmur, 'Patron of Assassins, known to all as the Rope of Shadow' The weeping grew fainter. 'The Seer is dead.'

A part of her mind cried out at that, while another asked, *What Seer?*

'I am within, yet apart. I stand at Shadowthrone's side, and he is named Ammanas and he is the Lord of Shadows. I am here as the hand of death.' Sorry smiled and nodded to herself, once again in control. Whatever had challenged that was now gone, once more buried deep inside. The luxury of weeping, of anger, of fear did not belong to her, had never belonged to her.

She drew a deep breath, and her senses narrowed to the task at hand. The fat little man was dangerous. The how and why of this remained to be answered, but every power hissed in alarm each time she caught a glimpse of him amid the crowds. And all that is dangerous, she told herself, must die.

Beneath the Second Tier Wall in the Lakefront, the market along Salt Walk was at its usual frenzied peak. The sour heat, building all day in the cluttered avenues and alleys, was at its height. Sweating, exhausted merchants screamed curses at competitors over the heads of customers. Fights broke out every few minutes in one or another area, the turgid jostle of the crowds pulling the contestants apart long before the arrival of ill-tempered guards.

Squatting on their grass mats, local Rhivi plainsmen called out in their nasal singsong endless descriptions of fine horseflesh. At intersections, Gadrobi herders stood at tethering poles surrounded by braying goats and sheep, while others pushed wooden carts burdened with cheeses and clay jugs filled with fermented milk. Daru fishermen walked with spears of smoked fish bobbing above their heads streaming with buzzing flies. Catlin weavers sat behind waist-high fortresses comprised of bolts of brightly dyed cloth. Gredfalan farmers stood in their wagons selling the season's bitter fruits and sweet tubers. Woodsellers forced their ox-drawn wagons through the crowds, their children clinging to the stacked bundles of wood like monkeys. Dark-robed men and women from Callows sang out the clashing claims of their Thousand Sects of D'rek, each holding aloft their sect's particular icon.

Kruppe strode down the market street with a jaunty step, his arms waving about seemingly of their own accord. Such movement, however, was no

mere affectation: it disguised the gesturing required for casting spells. As a thief, it appeared that Kruppe's tastes did not demand much. He stole food – fruit and sweets, mostly – and it was to such desires of the palate that he had honed his skills of magic.

As he walked, the chaotic dance of his arms was timed to catch apples flying from baskets, pastries leaping from trays, chocolate-covered cherries plucked from pans, all moving so swiftly as to be no more than blurs dodging bodies in their path. Inside the wide, flopping sleeves of his coat, pockets had been sewn, some large, some tiny. All that entered Kruppe's hands disappeared up his sleeves, tucked into appropriately sized pockets. He strode on, a connoisseur of edible delicacies of a hundred cultures, an expression of sated contentment on his round face.

Eventually, after a long, circuitous route, Kruppe arrived at the Phoenix Inn. He paused on the steps and chatted with a lone thug standing there, removing from a sleeve a glazed honeyball. Then, taking a bite from the sweetmeat, he pushed open the door and disappeared inside.

Half a block down the street, Sorry propped herself against the pitted wall of a tenement and crossed her arms. The fat little man was a wonder. She'd seen enough of his exquisite ballet to recognize him as an Adept. Yet she felt confused, for the mind behind the man's façade hinted at capacities far greater than those he'd shown. Confirmation that here indeed was a dangerous creature.

From where she stood she studied the inn. The man on the steps seemed to be screening everyone entering, but she couldn't detect any gesture that might indicate a thieves' cant. The conversations were brief, usually of mutual recognition. Nevertheless she intended to enter the inn. It was the kind of place Whiskeyjack had sent Kalam and Quick Ben to find – a haunt of thieves, strong-arms and assassins. Why the sergeant wanted to find such a place was a detail that hadn't been shared with her. The wizard and Kalam had suspicions about her, and she sensed that their arguments were swaying Whiskeyjack. If they could, they'd keep her out of everything, but she didn't intend that to happen.

Pushing herself from the wall, Sorry crossed the street and approached the Phoenix Inn. Overhead, the afternoon had waned into a thick, heavy dusk, the smell of rain in the air. As she neared the front steps, the thug's attention focused on her. The man grinned. 'Following Kruppe around, eh?' He wagged his head. 'Girls shouldn't carry swords anyway. Hope you're not planning to go inside. With a sword? Uh, uh. Not unescorted, anyway.'

Sorry stepped back. She glanced up and down the street. The nearest pedestrian was over a street away, heading in the opposite direction. She closed her hands around the edges of her half-cloak and drew it around her waist. 'Let me pass,' she said quietly. How had that fat man spotted her?

The man leaned on the railing. 'All this is just begging for some kind of conversation, friendly-like,' he said. 'So how about you and me go back to the alley. You lay down your sword and I'll be gentle. Otherwise, things could get rough, and what would be the fun of—?'

Sorry's left hand darted out. A dagger flashed between them. The blade entered the man's right eye and then his brain. He jerked back over the rail and fell, landing with a heavy thud beside the steps. Sorry walked up to him and retrieved her dagger. She paused, adjusting the belt that carried her duelling sword, then checked the street. Seeing no one close enough to have noticed anything awry in the deepening gloom, she climbed the steps and entered the inn.

She was stopped before she'd taken her second step, coming face-to-face with a moaning boy hanging upside down. Two rough-looking women were taking turns to swing him back and forth. Every time he tried to reach up to the rope tied to his feet he earned a knock on the head. One of the women grinned at Sorry.

'Hey, now!' the woman said, grasping Sorry's arm as she walked by.

Sorry turned a cold eye on the woman. 'What?'

The woman leaned close, her breath a mist of beer as she whispered, 'You get in trouble, you just call for Irilta and Meese. That's us, right?'

'Thank you.'

Sorry resumed her walk. She'd already seen the fat little man – what had the thug called him? Kruppe. He'd seated himself at a table near the far wall, beneath the gallery. Through the crowded room Sorry saw a space open at the bar, where she might take position and observe. She pushed forward.

Since Kruppe evidently knew of her, she decided to make no effort in hiding her attention. Often, that was exactly the kind of pressure that cracked a man's will. In a war of patience, Sorry smiled inwardly, the mortal is ever at a disadvantage.

Crokus turned the corner and approached the Phoenix Inn. The course Mammot had set for him was intimidating, the education extending far beyond books, to the etiquette of court manners, the functions of various officials, blood-lines and particular quirks among certain dignitaries – but he'd vowed to himself he'd follow it through. His goal was one day to stand before that D'Arle maiden, awaiting a formal introduction.

Something in him mocked the image. There stands Crokus, the scholar, the sophisticated young promise, the thief. It was all too absurd. Yet it dogged him, steeled his resolve. He'd come to it one day soon. Until then, however, there were other matters to attend to, things that needed redressing.

As he came up to the inn's steps he saw a huddled shadow beneath the railing. Cautiously Crokus moved closer.

As Sorry reached the bar the door slammed open on the other side of the room. She turned with everyone else to see a young, black-haired man standing there.

'Someone's murdered Chert!' the man shouted. 'He's been knifed!'

Half a dozen patrons surged to the door, pushing past the young man and disappearing outside.

Sorry faced the bar again. Catching the barman's eye she said, 'Gredfalan ale, please, in a pewter tankard.'

The woman Irilta had called Meese appeared beside her, thumping two broad forearms on the bar as she leaned forward. 'Attend the lady, Scurve,' Meese growled. 'She got taste.'

Meese dipped her head close to Sorry's. 'Good taste all round. Chert was a pig.'

Sorry stiffened. Her hands slipped down beneath her cloak.

'Easy, girl,' Meese said, in a low tone. 'We ain't wagging tongues. Around here, y' take care of yourselves first, and I don't want no knife in my eye. We said we'd take care of you, didn't we?'

The ale arrived, as ordered. Sorry raised a hand and closed it on the tankard's handle. 'You don't want to take care of me, Meese,' she said quietly.

Another person arrived on Meese's other side. Glancing at him, Sorry saw that it was the black-haired youth, his face pale. 'Dammit, Meese,' he hissed, 'I'm having a really bad day.'

Meese chuckled and draped an arm over his shoulders. 'Scurve, serve us up a couple of them Gredfalan ales. Crokus here's earned Darujhistan's best.' Meese turned her head and bent close to Sorry again. 'Next time,' she whispered, 'you don't want to show that kind of breeding. Not around here, anyway.'

Sorry frowned down at her drink. She'd been careless, ordering the city's best. Then she took a mouthful. 'That's fine,' she said. 'Fine indeed.'

Meese grinned, nudging Crokus. 'The lady likes it just fine.'

Crokus leaned forward, offering Sorry a weary but warm smile. From outside came the klaxon of the Guard.

Scurve served up the two ales.

Sorry watched Crokus's gaze move down her body, then stop. The youth's smile tightened, his face whitening even more than before. As the tankard was set before him, Crokus averted his eyes and reached for it.

'Pay up before you drink that, Crokus,' Scurve muttered. 'You're getting to be just as bad as Kruppe.'

Crokus reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of coins. As he tried to count them some slipped between his fingers and bounced on the bar. Of the three that fell, two clattered briefly then stopped. The third coin spun, and continued spinning. Sorry's eyes swung to it, as did Scurve's and Meese's. Crokus reached for it, then hesitated. The coin was still spinning, its momentum unchanged.

Sorry stared at the coin, feeling echoes of power slam into her skull like ocean waves. From within, all at once, came an answering surge. Scurve shouted as the coin skidded across the bar, bounced once high into the air, then clattered to a stop directly in front of Crokus.

No one spoke. Beyond their small ring no one else had witnessed the event.

Crokus thrust his hand forward and collected the coin. 'Not this one,' he grated.

'Fine,' Scurve answered, in a similar, hoarse voice. He reached shaking hands to gather in the other coins Crokus had laid on the bar.

Beneath the counter, Sorry brushed her hand against her dagger's hilt and scabbard. It came away wet. So, Crokus had seen the blood. She would have to kill him. Only, her frown deepened, she knew she wouldn't.

'Crokus, my boy!' came a shout from under the gallery.

Meese sneered in that direction. 'The flopping fish himself,' she muttered. 'Kruppe calls, lad.'

Crokus snorted, having returned the coin to his pocket. He picked up his tankard. 'Later, Meese.'

So, she'd found Oponn's man – as easily as that. And he was connected to Kruppe, somehow. This was almost too simple. It made her suspicious.

'A likely lad,' Meese said. 'Me and Irilta, we look out for him, right?'

Sorry leaned against the bar, her eyes on the tankard in her hand. She'd have to play this very carefully. That burst of Shadow sorcery, responding to the Coin's influence, had been entirely instinctive. 'Right, Meese,' she said. 'No worries on that count. OK?'

Meese sighed. 'OK. Let's try for the cheap stuff now. Scurve? Daru beer, if you please. Earthenware, if you have it.'

Crouched against the Second Tier Wall on the Lakefront side was Quip's Bar, a common haunt of shipmen and fisher-hands. The bar's walls were cut sandstone, and over time the whole edifice had developed a backward lean, as if withdrawing from the front street. Quip's now sagged against the Second Tier Wall, as did the adjoining squatter shacks constructed mostly of driftwood and hull planks washed ashore from the occasional wreck out on Mole's Reef.

Dusk brought a light rain to Darujhistan, the mists crawling in from the water and on to the shore. Far out over the lake lightning flashed, but too distant for thunder to be heard.

Kalam emerged from Quip's Bar just as a local Greyface brought his burning pitch-stick to a nearby gas-light, having moments earlier opened the copper valves. The lamp ignited in a flash of blue flame that quickly evened out. Kalam paused outside the bar to watch the odd, grey-robed man continue on down the street. He squinted skyward, then moved up the street. He came to the last squatter shack, this one abutting a peculiar jag in the tier wall, and entered.

Quick Ben looked up from his cross-legged position in the centre of the dirt floor. 'Any luck?'

'No,' Kalam said. 'The Guild's gone to ground – why, I've no idea.' He went to the far wall and sat down on his bedroll. He leaned back against the

ancient, pitted stone and eyed his comrade. 'You think maybe the City Council's moved to take out the local assassins?'

Quick Ben's gaze glittered in the gloom. 'You mean, anticipating we'd try to make contact?'

Kalam looked away. 'I doubt they're idiots. They must know it's the Malazan way. Offer the Guild a contract it can't refuse, then sit back and watch the rulers drop like headless flies. Whiskeyjack suggested the plan. Dujek OK'd it. Those two were talking the old Emperor's language there, Quick. The old man must be laughing in hell right now.'

The wizard shivered. 'An unpleasant image.'

Shrugging, Kalam continued, 'It's all academic, anyway, if we can't find a local assassin. Wherever they are, it's not in Lakefront District, I'd swear to that. The only name I picked up that's got mystery around it is someone named the Eel. Not an assassin, though. Something else.'

'Where next, then?' Quick Ben asked. 'Gadrobi District?'

'No. Just a bunch of farmers and herders there. Hell, the smell alone coming from that place is enough to cross it off the list. We'll try Daru, starting tomorrow.' Kalam hesitated. 'What about your side of things?'

Quick Ben bowed his head. When he answered it was a faint whisper. 'Almost ready.'

'Whiskeyjack nearly choked when he heard your proposal. So did I. You'll be walking into the viper's den, Quick. You sure it's necessary?'

'No.' Quick Ben looked up. 'Personally, I'd rather we just dropped everything and ran – away from it all, from the Empire, from Darujhistan, from war. But try convincing the sergeant to do that. He's loyal to an idea, and that's the hardest kind to turn.'

Kalam nodded. 'Honour, integrity, all that expensive crap.'

'Right. So we do it this way because it's the only way left to us. Hairlock's insanity has become a liability, but we can use him still, one last time.

Power draws power, and with luck Hairlock's demise will do just that. The more Ascendants we can lure into the fray the better.'

'I always thought that was something to avoid, Quick.'

The wizard's smile was strained. 'Tell me about it. But right now the more confusion and chaos the better.'

'And if Tayschrenn catches wind?'

Quick Ben's smile broadened. 'Then we're dead all that much sooner. So it goes.'

Kalam barked a short, humourless laugh. 'So it goes.'

The wizard cocked his head. 'The sun's past the horizon. Time to start.'

'You want me out of here?' Kalam asked.

Quick Ben shook his head. 'No, I want you right where you are for this one. If I don't come back, take my body and burn it down to ash. Scatter the ash to the four winds, and curse my name with all your heart.'

Kalam was silent. Then he asked, in a growl, 'How long do I wait?'

'Dawn,' Quick Ben replied. 'You understand I would only ask this of my closest friend.'

'I understand. Now, get on with it, dammit.'

Quick Ben gestured. A ring of fire sprang from the earth, surrounding the wizard. He closed his eyes.

To Kalam, his friend seemed to deflate slightly, as if something essential to life had disappeared. Quick Ben's neck creaked as his chin sank down to his chest, his shoulders slumped, and a long breath escaped with a slow hiss. The ring of fire flared, then dimmed to a lapping glimmer on the earth.

Kalam shifted position, stretching out his legs and crossing his arms. In the gathering silence, he waited.

A pale Murillio returned to the table and sat down. 'Someone's disposing of the body,' he said, then shook his head. 'Whoever killed Chert was a professional with a real nasty streak. Right through the eye—'

'Enough!' Kruppe cried out, raising his hands. 'Kruppe happens to be eating, dear Murillio, and Kruppe also happens to have a delicate stomach.'

'Chert was a fool,' Murillio continued, ignoring Kruppe, 'but hardly the type to attract such viciousness.'

Crokus said nothing. He'd seen the blood on that dark-haired woman's dagger.

'Who can say?' Kruppe waggled his eyebrows. 'Perhaps he was witness to some horrific horror. Perhaps he was stamped out as a man crushes a cute mouse underfoot.'

Crokus glanced around. His eyes returned to the woman standing with Meese at the bar. Dressed in leather armour with a plain duelling sword strapped to her hip, she reminded him of the time he'd watched, as a young boy, a troop of mercenaries ride through the city. They had been the Crimson Guard, he recalled: five hundred men and women without a shiny buckle among them.

His gaze remained on the woman. Like a mercenary, a killer for whom killing had long since lost its horror. What had Chert done to earn a knife in the eye?

Crokus looked away, in time to see Rallick Nom enter the bar. The assassin approached the table, seemingly unconscious of the locals moving from his path.

Coll intercepted him before he reached the table. The burly man slapped Rallick's back and leaned drunkenly against him. 'Nom, you old bastard!'

Rallick threw an arm around Coil's round shoulders and together they came to the table.

Kruppe looked up. 'Ho, my dear comrades! Kruppe invites you to join our familiar gathering.' Waving his arms at the two empty chairs, he rocked

back in his seat. 'To bring you up to date on our dramatic doings, the lad Crokus has been staring dreamily into space while Murillio and Kruppe have discussed the latest natterings of the street rats.'

Coll remained standing, weaving unsteadily, a frown knitting his brows. Rallick sat down and reached for the pitcher of beer. 'What natterings are those?' the assassin asked casually.

'The rumour that we're now allied with Moon's Spawn,' Murillio said.

'Nonsense, of course,' Kruppe said. 'Have you seen anything to suggest such a thing?'

Murillio grinned. 'The Moon hasn't moved away, has it? Not only that, there's that Council tent stationed directly under it.'

Crokus spoke up. 'I heard from Uncle Mammot that the councilmen haven't had any luck getting a message to who-ever's in Moon's Spawn.'

'Typical,' Murillio commented, his eyes narrowing briefly on Rallick.

'Who lives in there?' Crokus asked.

Coll tottered and threw both hands down on the table to steady himself. He thrust his red face at Crokus and bellowed, 'Five black dragons!'

Within the Warren of Chaos, Quick Ben knew of the innumerable shifting pathways that led to doors. Though he called them doors they were in fact barriers created where Warrens touched, a calcretion of energy as solid as basalt. Chaos touched on all realms with gnarled fingertips bleeding power, the doors hardened wounds in the flesh of other worlds, other avenues of magic.

The wizard had focused his talents on such doors. While within the Warren of Chaos, he had learned the ways of shaping their energy. He'd found means of altering the barriers, of sensing what lay beyond them. Each Warren of magic possessed a smell, each realm a texture, and though the pathways he took were never the same as those he'd taken before, he had mastered the means of finding those he sought.

He travelled now down one of those paths, a track of nothingness enclosed by the Warren's own accretions, twisting and fraught with contradictions. On one trail he'd will himself forward yet find himself moving back; he'd come to a sharp right turn, followed by another, then another, then yet another – all in the same direction.

He knew it was the power of his mind that opened the pathways, but they had their own laws – or perhaps they were his, yet unknown to him. Whatever the source of the shaping, it was madness defined.

He came at last to the door he sought. The barrier showed as nothing more than a dull, slate-grey stone. Hovering before it, Quick Ben whispered a command, and his spirit took the form of his own body. He stood a moment, mastering the disconnected tremble of his ghost-body, then stepped forward and laid hands on the door.

Its edges were hard and warm. Towards the centre it grew hot and soft to the touch. The surface slowly lost its opaqueness beneath the wizard's hands, becoming glassy like obsidian. Quick Ben closed his eyes.

He'd never before sought to pass through such a door. He was not even certain that it was possible. And if he survived into the beyond, was there any way to return? Past the mechanics of the one thing loomed his final, most difficult worry: he was about to attempt entry into a realm where he wasn't welcome.

Quick Ben opened his eyes. 'I am direction,' he said quietly. He leaned against the barrier. 'I am the power of will in a place that respects this, and only this.' He leaned harder. 'I am the Warren's touch. To chaos nothing is immune, nowhere is immune.' He felt the door begin to yield. He lashed out one hand behind him, fending off a growing pressure. 'Only I shall pass!' he hissed. Abruptly, with a strange thumping sound, he slipped through, energy flaring around his body.

The wizard staggered over rough, parched earth. He regained his balance and looked around. He stood on a barren plain, the horizon off to his left humped with low hills. Overhead spanned a sky the colour of quicksilver, a

scatter of long, stringy clouds moving in unison and black as ink directly above.

Quick Ben sat down, folding his legs and clasping his hands in his lap. 'Shadowthrone,' he said, 'Lord of Shadows, I am come to your realm. Will you receive my presence as befits a peaceful visitor?'

From the hills came an answer: the howling of Hounds.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Walk with me
on Thieves' Road
hear its song
underfoot
how clear its
tone in misstep
as it sings
you in two

Apsalar's Cant
Drisbin (b. 1135)

Kneading his brow, Kruppe sat reading in Mammot's study.

... and in the Calling Down to earth the God was Crippled, and so Chained in its place. In the Calling Down many lands were sundered by the God's Fists, and things were born and things were released. Chained and Crippled was this God

Kruppe glanced up from the ancient tome and rolled his eyes. 'Brevity, Kruppe prays for brevity!' He returned to the faded handwritten script.

> *and it bred caution in the unveiling of its powers. The Crippled God bred caution but not well enough, for the powers of the earth came to it in the end. Chained was the Crippled God, and so Chained was it destroyed. And upon this barren plain that imprisoned the Crippled God many gathered to the deed. Hood, grey wanderer of Death, was among the gathering, as was Dessembrae, then Hood's Warrior – though it was here and in this time that Dessembrae shattered the bonds Hood held upon him. Also among the gathering were*

Kruppe groaned and flipped pages. The list seemed interminable, absurdly long. From this account he half expected to see his grandmother's name among those listed. Finally, after three pages, he found the names he sought.

> *and among those that came from the vaulted heavens of silver, the Tiste Andii, dwellers of Darkness in the Place before Light, Black Dragons numbering five, and in their league sailed red-winged Silanah, said to dwell among the Tiste Andii in their Fang of Darkness descending from the vaulted heavens of silver*

Kruppe nodded, muttering to himself. A descending Fang of Darkness – Moon's Spawn? Home to five Black Dragons and one Red Dragon? He shivered. How had Coll come upon this? True, the man hadn't always been a drunken lout, but even his past station, lofty as it was, hadn't been the scholarly kind.

Who, then, had spoken through the old man's wine-stained mouth?

'That,' Kruppe sighed to himself, 'shall have to wait its answer. The significance, however, of Coil's bellowed claim lies in its evident truth, and as to how it pertains to the present situation.' He closed the book and rose to his feet. Behind him he heard footsteps.

'I've brought you herbal tea,' the old man said, as he entered the closet-sized room. 'Has *Alladart's Realm Compendium* been beneficial, Kruppe?'

'Beneficial indeed,' Kruppe said, gratefully accepting the earthenware mug. 'Kruppe has learned the value of modern language. Such long-lipped dribbles common to those ancient scholars are a curse Kruppe is thankful to find extinct in our time.'

'Ah, ha,' the old man said, coughing slightly and looking away. 'Well, do you mind if I ask what you were seeking?'

Kruppe glanced up, the corners of his eyes crinkling slightly. 'Not at all, Mammot. I thought to find mention of my grandmother's name.'

Mammot frowned, then nodded. 'I see. Well, I'll not enquire as to your luck, then.'

'Please, do not,' Kruppe said, eyes widening. 'Luck is such a dreadful companion these days, with all awry as all happens to be. But thank you for understanding Kruppe's need for circumspection.'

'Not at all,' Mammot said, waving one hand. 'I didn't mean to – well, yes, I did. Curiosity, you understand. The intellectual kind.'

Kruppe smiled beatifically and sipped tea.

'Well,' Mammot said, 'shall we return to the common room, then, and find respite before the hearth?'

They strode into the other chamber. Once seated, Kruppe stretched out his legs and leaned back. 'How has your writing been coming along?' he asked.

'Slow,' Mammot answered, 'as one would expect, of course.'

It seemed Mammot was working up to something, and so Kruppe waited, idly wiggling his toes. A minute passed, then the old man cleared his throat and spoke. 'Kruppe, have you seen much of my dear nephew lately?'

Kruppe raised his eyebrows. 'Long ago,' he said, 'Kruppe made a promise to a man, the man being a concerned uncle to a young boy who found the streets an exciting playground. Aye, the lad dreamed of sword-fights and dark deeds committed in alleys on behalf of princesses in disguise, or some such thing—'

Mammot was nodding, his eyes closed.

'– and to such promises Kruppe has availed of himself thoroughly, for he, too, loved the boy. And as with any endeavour, survival is measured in ability, and so did Kruppe take the lad under his silken wing, with some success, yes?'

Mammot smiled, still nodding.

'And so, to answer the uncle's question. Indeed Kruppe has seen the lad.'

Mammot leaned forward and fixed Kruppe with an intense gaze. 'Have you seen anything odd in his actions? I mean, has he asked you any strange questions, made any requests?'

Kruppe's eyes narrowed. He paused to drink. 'Bluntly, yes. For one, he sought the return of a fine cache of jewellery he acquired recently, for personal reasons – as he said. Personal reasons. Kruppe wondered then and wonders now, but the lad's seeming sincerity, nay, focused intensity, struck Kruppe as laudable.'

'Agreed! Would you believe Crokus has now expressed an interest in formal education? I can't understand it. The boy's positively obsessed about something.'

'Perhaps, then, Kruppe should piece this together.'

'Thank you,' Mammot said, relieved. 'I would know where all this is coming from. So much ambition all at once, I fear it may soon burn itself out. If we can nourish it, however ...'

'By all means,' Kruppe said. 'There is more to life than petty thievery, after all.'

Mammot grinned. 'Why, Kruppe, I'm surprised to hear that coming from you.'

'Such comments are better left between you and Kruppe. In any case, I believe Murillio knows something of all this. He intimated as much this evening while we dined at the Phoenix Inn.'

Mammot asked, 'Is Murillio well?'

Kruppe smiled. 'The net about the lad remains intact,' he said. 'For one, Rallick Nom has taken the responsibility seriously indeed. Mayhap he sees something of his own lost youth in Crokus. In truth, Rallick is a man whose true nature escapes Kruppe. Fiercely loyal for certain, and one who, as you well know, honours his debts with such vigour as to humble those around him. Excepting Kruppe, naturally. Yet is it blood that travels his veins? One must wonder, at times.'

A distant look had entered Mammot's face.

Kruppe tensed. The air smelled of magic. He leaned forward and studied the old man seated across from him. Someone was communicating with Mammot, and the Warren that now pulsed in the room was familiar to Kruppe.

He sat back and waited.

Eventually, Mammot got swiftly to his feet. 'I have some research to do,' he said distractedly. 'As for you, Kruppe, Master Baruk wishes to speak with you immediately.'

'I thought I sensed the alchemist's presence,' Kruppe said, rising with a soft grunt. 'Ah, the rigours of these fated nights ever urge us on. Until later, then, Mammot.'

'Goodbye,' the scholar said, a frown on his face as he crossed the room. He entered the small chamber where Kruppe had spent the past hour.

Kruppe adjusted the sleeves of his cloak. Whatever had happened, it had been enough to jar Mammot's etiquette, and that alone hinted at dire events. 'Well,' he murmured, 'best not keep Baruk waiting, then. At least,' he amended, as he headed for the door, 'not for too long. Decorum demands that Kruppe retain his sense of dignity. He shall walk fast, yes. But walk he shall, for Kruppe needs time to think, to plan, to scheme, to anticipate, to backtrack with some thoughts, to leap ahead with others, to do all the things necessary. First and foremost, Kruppe must discern the nature of the woman who followed him, and who killed Chert, and who noted that Crokus saw the blood on her weapon, and who marked Rallick Nom as an assassin with his very arrival. She might well provide the key to everything, and more, for the Coin did indeed turn its face upon her, if only for a moment. And that, thinks Kruppe, shall return to us all, for good or ill.' He stopped and looked around, blinking rapidly. 'At the very least,' he muttered, 'Kruppe should leave Mammot's room.' He glanced back at the chamber Mammot had entered. From within came the sounds of brittle pages being rapidly turned. Kruppe sighed in relief, then left.

Crone ruffled her singed feathers and hopped about in agitation. Where was that alchemist? She had a thousand things to attend to before the night was done, though in truth she couldn't think of any of them. Nevertheless, she disliked being kept waiting.

The door to the study opened and Baruk strode through, gathering a robe about his considerable bulk. 'My apologies, Crone, I was otherwise indisposed.'

Crone grunted. Sorcery trailed from the man in thick, pungent streams. 'My master, Lord Anomander Rake,' she said, without preamble, 'has commanded that I tell you what I told him of my adventures on the Rhivi Plain.'

Baruk came up to where the Great Raven paced on the map table. The alchemist frowned. 'You've been injured.'

'Pride, no more. Hearken then to my story.'

Baruk raised an eyebrow. The old witch's mood was dark. He fell silent and she began.

'A small wooden puppet approaches from the north, a creation of soul-shifting and sourced from a Warren of Chaos. Its power is immense, twisted, malign even to Great Ravens. It killed many of my kin as it slipped in and out of its Warren. It evidently took pleasure in such acts.' Crone snapped her beak in anger, then continued, 'It pursues a power I could not approach, and whatever this power, it strikes directly for the Gadrobi Hills – my lord and I are agreed in this. The power seeks something within those hills, yet we are not native to this land. Hence we bring this news to you, Alchemist. Two forces are converging on the Gadrobi Hills. My lord asks you why.'

Baruk's face had lost all its colour. He turned slowly and walked to a chair. Sitting down, he steepled his hands before his face and closed his eyes. 'The Malazan Empire seeks something it cannot hope to control, something buried within the Gadrobi Hills. Whether or not either force is capable of freeing that thing is another matter. Seeking is not the same as finding, and finding is not the same as succeeding.'

Crone hissed impatiently. 'Who is buried there, Alchemist?'

'A Jaghut Tyrant, imprisoned by the Jaghut themselves. Generations of scholars and sorcerers have sought to find this barrow. None managed to discover even so much as a clue.' Baruk looked up, his expression lined with worry. 'I know of one man, here in Darujhistan, who has gathered all the available knowledge concerning this burial place. I must confer with him. I can give your lord this, however. There lies a standing stone in the Gadrobi Hills – I know its location precisely. It is almost invisible, only its weathered top breaks the ground, perhaps a hand's span in height. The remaining twenty feet are beneath the earth. You will see the remnants of many pits and trenches that have been excavated around it – all fruitless. For while the stone marks the beginning point, it is not the entrance to the barrow.'

'Where, then, is this entrance?'

'That I will not tell you. Once I speak with my colleague, perhaps I can give you more details. Perhaps not. But the means by which the barrow is entered must remain a secret.'

'This avails us nothing! My lord—'

'Is extremely powerful,' Baruk cut in. 'His intentions are anything but clear, Crone, no matter that we are allied. What lies within that barrow can destroy a city – this city. That I will not allow to enter Rake's hands. You shall have the location of the standing stone, for it is there that the hunters must first go. I have one question to ask, Crone. This puppet, are you certain it pursues this other power?'

Crone bobbed her head. 'It tracks. It hides when necessary. You assume both powers are Malazan. Why?'

Baruk grunted. 'First, they want Darujhistan. They'll do anything to win it. They've had access to vast libraries among the lands they've conquered. The Jaghut barrow is no secret in and of itself. Second, you said both powers came down from the north. They can only be Malazan. Why one hides from the other is beyond me, though I wouldn't doubt that there are competing factions within the Empire – any political entity as large as that one is

bound to be rife with discord. In any case, they pose a direct threat to Darujhistan and, by extension, to your lord's desires to prevent the Malazan Empire from conquering us. Assuming that the powers are Malazan seems warranted.'

Crone's displeasure was obvious. 'You will be kept informed of the activities on the Rhivi Plain. My lord must decide whether to intercept these powers before they reach the Gadrobi Hills.' She turned an angry eye on Baruk. 'He has received little assistance from his allies. I trust when we next speak that situation will be remedied.'

The alchemist shrugged. 'My first meeting with Anomander Rake has proved my only meeting with him. Assistance demands communication.' His tone hardened. 'Inform your lord that the present dissatisfaction exists with us as much as it does with him.'

'My lord has been busy with his side of things,' Crone muttered, flapping to the window-sill.

Baruk stared at the bird as she prepared to leave. 'Busy?' he asked darkly. 'In what way?'

'In due time, Alchemist,' Crone purred. A moment later she was gone.

Baruk cursed, and with an angry gesture returned the window to its place and slammed the shutters. Doing this through magic and from a distance was not as satisfying as it would have been had he done it physically. Grumbling, he rose and walked to the mantelpiece. As he poured himself some wine, he paused. Less than half an hour ago he'd conjured a demon. It was not an ambitious conjuring: he'd needed a spy, not a killer. Something told him he'd be calling upon far deadlier creatures in the near future. He scowled, then took a mouthful of wine. 'Mammot,' he whispered, as he opened his Warren, 'I need you.'

He smiled as a scene appeared in his head, of a small room and a stone hearth. Seated in the chair opposite his point of view was Kruppe. 'Good. I need you both.'

The Hound that approached Quick Ben was wide and heavy, its fur a pasty white. As it trotted up to the wizard, he saw that its eyes were also white. The creature possessed no pupils. It stopped a short distance away and sat.

Quick Ben bowed. 'You are the Hound called Blind,' he said, 'mate to Baran and mother of Gear. I come seeking no harm. I would speak with your master.'

He heard a growl beside him and froze. Slowly, he turned his head and looked down. Less than a foot from his right leg lay another Hound, mottled brown and tan, lean and scarred. Its eyes were fixed on Blind. 'Baran.' He nodded. Another growl answered Baran's, this one behind the wizard. He turned further to see, ten feet away, a third Hound, this one long, black and sleek. Its eyes, fixed on him, glowed red. 'And Shan,' he said quietly. He faced Blind again. 'Have you found your quarry, or are you my escort?'

Baran rose silently beside him, its shoulders level with his chest. Blind stood, then trotted off to the left. She stopped and looked back. Twin growls spurred Quick Ben after them.

The land around them changed slowly, details slipping into sourceless shadows and re-emerging subtly altered. On what the wizard thought of as the north horizon, a grey forest climbed a slope to what might have been a wall. This wall was in place of sky – maybe it *was* sky – but to Quick Ben it looked strangely close, even though the forest was leagues away. Glancing overhead did not help him confirm or refute his feeling that this realm was bordered by a magical wall, for it, too, seemed close, almost within reach. Yet black clouds rode winds above him, skewing his perceptions and making him dizzy.

Another Hound had joined their company. This one, a male, was dark grey, one of its eyes blue, the other yellow. Though it didn't come close, Quick Ben judged that it was the largest of those around him, and its movement hinted at deadly speed. He knew it as Doan, first born to the pack's leader, Rood, and its first mate, Pallick.

Doan trotted alongside Blind for a time, then, when they came to the crest of a low rise, he bolted forward. Reaching the crest, Quick Ben saw their

destination. He sighed. Just as the image carved upon the altar within the temples dedicated to Shadowthrone, Shadowkeep rose from the plain like an enormous lump of black glass, fractured with curving planes, rippled in places, with some corners glistening white as if crushed. The largest surface facing them – a wall, he supposed – was mottled and dull, as if it was a cortex, the weathered surface of obsidian.

There were no windows as such, but many of the slick surfaces looked semi-translucent and seemed to glow with an inner light. As far as Quick Ben could see, there was no door, no gate, no drawbridge.

They arrived, and the wizard exclaimed in surprise as Blind strode into the stone and disappeared. He hesitated, and Boran came as close to nudging him as Quick Ben allowed. He walked up to the mottled stone and held out his hands as he stepped into it. He felt nothing, passing through effortlessly to find himself in a hallway that could have been found in any mundane estate.

Barren of trappings, the corridor led straight forward for, perhaps, thirty feet and ended at double doors. Blind and Doan sat to either side of these doors, which now opened of their own accord.

Quick Ben entered the room beyond. The chamber was domed. Opposite him stood a simple obsidian throne on a slightly raised dais. The dull, cobbled floor bore no rugs, and the walls were bare except for torches spaced every ten feet. Quick Ben counted forty, but the light was fitful, seeming to struggle against encroaching shadows.

At first he thought the throne unoccupied, but as he approached he saw the figure seated there. It seemed composed of almost translucent shadows, vaguely human in form, but hooded, preventing even the glint of eyes. Still, Quick Ben could feel the god's attention fixed solely on him, and he barely repressed a shiver.

Shadowthrone spoke, his voice calm and clear. 'Shan tells me you know the names of my Hounds.'

Quick Ben stopped before the dais. He bowed. 'I was once an acolyte within your temple, Lord.'

The god was silent for a time, then he said, 'Is it wise to admit such a thing, Wizard? Do I look kindly upon those who once served me but then abandoned my ways? Tell me. I would hear from you what my priests teach.'

'To begin upon the Path of Shadow and then to leave it is rewarded by the Rope.'

'Meaning?'

'I am marked for assassination by all who follow your ways, Lord.'

'Yet here you stand, Wizard.'

Quick Ben bowed again. 'I would strike a deal, Lord.'

The god giggled, then raised a hand. 'No, dear Shan. Strike naught.'

Quick Ben stiffened. The black Hound stepped around him, and ascended the dais. She lay down before her god and eyed the wizard blankly.

'Do you know why I just saved your life, Wizard?'

'I do, Lord.'

Shadowthrone leaned forward. 'Shan wants you to tell me.'

Quick Ben met the Hound's red stare. 'Shadowthrone loves deals.'

The god sighed and sank back. 'Acolyte, indeed. Well, then, Wizard, speak on, while you can.'

'I must begin with a question, Lord.'

'Ask it.'

'Does Gear still live?'

Shan's eyes flared and she half rose before the god's hand touched her head.

'Now that,' Shadowthrone said, 'is quite a question. You've managed something few, alas, have been able to do. Wizard, my curiosity is piqued. So, I answer you: yes, Gear survives. By all means, continue.'

'Lord, I would deliver into your hands the one who offended your Hound.'

'How? He belongs to Oponn.'

'Not him, Lord. But the one who led Gear to that chamber. The one who sought to take Gear's soul, and would have succeeded if not for Oponn's mortal tool.'

'In exchange for what?'

Quick Ben cursed inwardly. He could read nothing from the god's tone, and that made things even trickier than he'd expected. 'My life, Lord. I wish the Rope's reward lifted from me.'

'Anything else?'

'Yes.' He hesitated, then continued, 'I wish to choose the time and place, Lord. Otherwise, this one of whom I speak will escape your Hounds through its Warren of Chaos. Only I can prevent that. Thus, it must be part of the deal. All that you need do is have your Hounds ready. I will call upon you at the proper moment, providing you with the creature's precise location. The rest is up to your Hounds.'

'You've planned this well, Wizard,' Shadowthrone said. 'As of yet, I can think of no way to kill both the creature and you. I commend you. How then, do you intend to call upon me? Surely, you'll not once again enter my realm.'

'Lord, you will be contacted. I guarantee this, but I can say no more about it.'

'And if I were to lay my powers upon you now, Wizard? If I were to wring whatever lies hidden in that frail brain of yours, how would you prevent me?'

'To answer that, Lord, you must answer my proposal first.'

Shan growled and this time the god made no motion to still her.

Quick Ben went on hastily, 'Given that you will seek to betray me at every opportunity, given that you'll hunt for the weaknesses in my plan, given all

this, I would have your word that you will complete your part of the deal if all else fails you, Lord. Give me that, and I will answer your last question.'

Shadowthrone was silent for a long minute. 'Ah well,' he muttered. 'Your cunning is admirable, Wizard. I am astonished and, I must admit, delighted by this duel. My only regret is that you departed the Paths of Shadow – you would have risen far. Very well. You have my word. The Hounds will be ready. Now, why shouldn't I shred your brain here and now, Wizard?'

'Your answer, Lord, is in your very words.' Quick Ben raised his arms. 'I did indeed rise far, Shadowthrone, in service to you.' He opened his Warren. 'You'll not have me, Lord, because you can't.' Quick Ben whispered his word of recall, a word born of Chaos. Power burst around him, and he felt as if a giant hand had closed around him. As it pulled him back into his Warren, he heard Shadowthrone's scream of recognition.

'It is you! Delat! You shape-shifting bastard!'

Quick Ben smiled. He'd done it. He was out of reach. He'd done it – again.

Kruppe was ushered into Baruk's study with none of the delays he was so fond of confounding. Slightly disappointed, he took his seat and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

Baruk entered. 'You took your time getting here,' he growled. 'Well, never mind. Have you any news?'

Kruppe laid his handkerchief on his lap and began carefully to fold it. 'We continue to protect the Coin Bearer, as instructed. As for the presence of Malazan infiltrators, no luck.' It was a major lie, but necessary. 'I am to convey a message to you,' he continued, 'most unusual in its source. Indeed, strange in fact was its delivery to Kruppe.'

'Get on with it.'

Kruppe winced. Baruk was in a terrible mood. He sighed. 'A message to you personally, Master.' He completed folding his handkerchief and looked

up. 'From the Eel.'

Baruk stiffened, then a scowl darkened his features. 'Why not?' he muttered. 'The man even knows who my agents are.' His gaze cleared and he watched Kruppe. 'I'm waiting,' he growled.

'Of course!' Kruppe shook loose his handkerchief and mopped his brow. '"Look to the streets to find those you seek." That, and no more. Delivered to Kruppe by the smallest child he'd ever seen—' He stopped and shook his head. No, such exaggeration would never do, not with Baruk's mood as foul as it appeared to be. 'A small child, in any case.'

Baruk stood glowering at the dying embers in the fireplace, his hands clasped behind his back, fingers twisting a large silver ring. 'Tell me, Kruppe,' he asked slowly, 'what do you know of this Eel?'

'Little, Kruppe admits. Man, woman? Unknown. Origins? A mystery. Designs? Perpetuating a status quo defined by aversion to tyranny. Or so it's said. Influence? Far-reaching, even if one discounts nine out of ten rumours associated with the Eel, his or her agents must number in the hundreds. All devoted to protecting Darujhistan. 'Tis said that Councilman Turban Orr is even now hunting them down, convinced they've ruined all his schemes. Mayhap they have, and for that we can all be relieved.'

Baruk seemed anything but relieved. Kruppe thought he could almost hear the man's teeth grinding. However, he turned to Kruppe and nodded. 'I have an assignment. For it, you will need to round up Murillio, Rallick and Coll. And take the Coin Bearer with you, just to keep him safe.'

Kruppe raised an eyebrow. 'Out of the city?'

'Yes. Paramount is the Coin Bearer – keep him beyond anyone's reach. As for your mission, you will observe. Nothing more. Do you understand me, Kruppe? Observe. To do anything else will be to risk the Coin Bearer falling into the wrong hands. While he is Oponn's tool, he also is the means by which another Ascendant can reach Oponn. The last thing we need is gods battling on the mortal plain.'

Kruppe cleared his throat. 'What are we to observe, Master?'

'I'm not sure, possibly a foreign work party, digging here and there.'

Kruppe started. 'As in ... road repairs?'

The alchemist frowned. 'I will be sending you to the Gadrobi Hills. Remain there until either someone comes or I contact you with further instructions. If someone comes, Kruppe, you're to remain hidden. Avoid detection at all costs – use your Warren, if need be.'

'None shall find Kruppe and his worthy, loyal comrades,' Kruppe said, smiling and waggling his fingers.

'Good. That will be all, then.'

Surprised, Kruppe climbed to his feet. 'When are we to leave, Master?'

'Soon. I'll let you know at least a day beforehand. Is that sufficient time?'

'Yes, friend Baruk. Kruppe deems that more than enough time. Rallick appears temporarily indisposed, but with luck he shall be available.'

'Get him if you can. If the Coin Bearer's influence turns against us, the assassin is charged with killing the boy. Does he understand this?'

'We've discussed it,' Kruppe said.

Baruk inclined his head and fell silent.

Kruppe waited a moment, then quietly left.

Less than an hour after Quick Ben's soul had left the body seated on the hut's floor and journeyed into the Shadow Realm, it creaked back into life. Red-eyed with an exhaustion born of unrelenting tension, Kalam pushed himself to his feet and waited for his friend to come round.

The assassin laid his hands on his long-knives, just to be on the safe side. If Quick Ben had been taken, whatever controlled him might well announce its arrival by attacking anyone within range. Kalam held his breath.

The wizard's eyes opened, the glaze slipping away as awareness returned. He saw Kalam, and smiled.

The assassin released his breath. 'Done? Success?'

'Yes, on both counts. Hard to believe, isn't it?'

Kalam found he was grinning uncontrollably. He stepped forward and helped Quick Ben to stand. The wizard leaned heavily against him, also grinning.

'He realized who I was just as I left.' Quick Ben's grin broadened. 'You should have heard him scream.'

'Well, are you surprised? How many High Priests burn the robes of their vestment?'

'Not enough, if you ask me. Without temples and priests the gods' bloody meddling couldn't touch the mortal realm. Now, that would be paradise, right, friend?'

'Perhaps,' said a voice at the doorway. Both men turned to see Sorry standing within the entrance, her half-cloak drawn about her slim body. She was wet with rain, and only now did Kalam notice the water dripping through cracks all around them. The assassin stepped away from Quick Ben to free his hands. 'What are you doing here?' he demanded.

'You dream of paradise, Wizard? I wish I'd heard the entire conversation.'

'How did you find us?' Quick Ben asked.

Sorry stepped inside and pushed back her hood. 'I've found an assassin,' she said. 'I've marked him. He is in a place called the Phoenix Inn, in the Daru District. Are you interested?' she asked, dully eyeing both men.

'I want answers,' Kalam said, in a low voice.

Quick Ben backed to the far wall, to give the assassin room and to prepare his spells if need be – though he was in no real shape to manage his Warren at the moment. Nor, he noticed, did Kalam look up to a scrap, not that the assassin would allow that to stop him. Right now, he was at his most dangerous – that low tone had said it all.

Sorry held her dead eyes on Kalam. 'The sergeant has sent me to you—'

'A lie,' Kalam interjected softly. 'Whiskeyjack doesn't know where we are.'

'Very well. I sensed your power, Wizard. It has a notable signature.'

Quick Ben was stunned. 'But I established a shield around this place,' he said.

'Yes. I, too, was surprised, Wizard. Usually I cannot find you. It seems cracks appeared.'

Quick Ben thought about that. 'Cracks', he decided, wasn't the right word – but Sorry didn't know that. She'd sensed his whereabouts because she was what they'd suspected, a pawn of the Rope. The Shadow Realm had been linked, however briefly and however tenuously, to his flesh and blood. Yet none but a servant of Shadow possessed the necessary sensitivity to detect that link. The wizard moved to stand beside Kalam and laid a hand on the burly man's shoulder.

Kalam threw him a startled glare.

'She's right. Cracks appeared, Kalam. She's obviously a natural Talent in the ways of sorcery. Come on, friend, the girl's found what we've been looking for. Let's move on it.'

Sorry pulled up the hood around her head. 'I am not accompanying you,' she said. 'You'll know the man when you see him. I suspect it is his task to make his profession obvious. Perhaps the Guild is anticipating you. In any case, find the Phoenix Inn.'

'What the hell are you up to?' Kalam demanded.

'I will be completing an assignment for the sergeant.' She turned and left the hut.

Kalam's shoulders slumped and he let out a long breath.

'She's the one we thought her to be,' Quick Ben said quietly. 'So far, so good.'

'In other words,' the assassin growled, 'if I'd attacked her I'd be a dead man right now.'

'Exactly. We'll take her out, when the time's right. But for now we need her.'

Kalam nodded.

'Phoenix Inn?'

'Damn right. And when we get there the first thing I'm doing is buying a drink.'

Quick Ben smiled. 'Agreed.'

Rallick looked up as the heavy-set man entered the bar. His black skin marked him a southerner, which in itself was not unusual. What caught Rallick's attention, however, was the horn-handled, silver-pommelled long-knives tucked into the man's narrow belt. Those weapons were anything but southern, and stamped on the pommels was a cross-hatched pattern, recognizable to all within the trade as the mark of an assassin.

The man swaggered into the room as if he owned it, and none of the locals he shouldered aside seemed inclined to disagree with him. He reached the bar and ordered an ale.

Rallick studied the dregs in his own tankard. Obviously the man wanted to be marked, precisely by someone like Rallick Nom, a Guild assassin. So, who was the bait, then? This didn't fit.

Ocelot, his Clan Leader, was convinced, along with everyone else in the Guild, that Empire Claws had come into the city and now waged war against them. Rallick wasn't so sure. The man standing at the bar could as easily be Seven Cities as a traveller from Callows. He had the look of Malazan Empire about him. Was he Claw? If so, why show himself? Up until now the enemy hadn't left a single clue, or a single eye-witness, as to their identity. The brazenness he now observed either didn't fit, or marked a reversal of tactics. Had Vorcan's order to go to ground triggered it?

Alarm bells rang in Rallick's head. None of this felt right.

Murillio leaned close to him. 'Something wrong, friend?'

'Guild business,' Rallick replied. 'You thirsty?'

Murillio grinned. 'An offer I can't refuse.'

After a single, bemused glance at Coil's unconscious form, slumped in the chair, the assassin left the table. What *had* all that been about five black dragons? He made his way to the bar. As he pushed through the crowd, he gave one youth a hard elbow to the back. The boy gasped, then surreptitiously slipped towards the kitchen.

Rallick arrived, called Scurve over, then ordered another pitcher. Though he did not look the man's way, he knew he'd been marked by him. It was no more than a feeling, but one he'd learned to trust. He sighed as Scurve delivered the foaming pitcher. Well, he'd done what Ocelot had demanded of him, though he suspected his Clan Leader would be asking for more.

He returned to the table and conversed with Murillio for a time, plying his friend with the majority of the ale. Murillio sensed a growing tension around Rallick and took his cue. He drained the last of his drink and rose. 'Well,' he said, 'Kruppe's scurried off, Crokus too. And Coil's once again dead to the world. Rallick, I thank you for the ale. Time to find a warm bed. Until the morrow, then.'

Rallick remained seated for another five minutes, only once brushing gazes with the black man leaning against the bar. Then he rose and strode into the kitchen. The two cooks rolled their eyes at each other as he strode past. Rallick ignored them. He came to the door, which had been left ajar in hopes of a cooling draught. The alley beyond was wet, though the rain had passed. From a shadowed recess on the wall opposite the inn stepped a familiar figure.

Rallick walked up to Ocelot. 'It's done. Your man is the big black one nursing an ale. Two daggers, hatch-marked. He looks mean and not one I'd like to tussle with. He's all yours, Ocelot.'

The man's pocked face twisted. 'He's still inside? Good. Head back in. Make sure you've been noticed – damn sure, Nom.'

Rallick crossed his arms. 'I'm sure already,' he drawled.

'You're to draw him out, lead him into Tarlow's warehouse – into the loading grounds.' Ocelot sneered. 'Vorcan's orders, Nom. And when you head out, do it by the front door. No mistakes, nothing subtle.'

'The man's an assassin,' Rallick grated. 'If I'm not subtle he'll know it's a trap and crawl all over me in seconds flat.'

'You do as Vorcan wills, Nom. Now get back inside!'

Rallick stared at his commander, to make his disgust plain, then returned to the kitchen. The cooks grinned at him, but only for a moment. One look at Rallick's face was enough to kill any humour in the room. They bent to their tasks as if prodded by a landmaster.

Rallick entered the main room, then stopped dead in his tracks. 'Damn,' he muttered. The black man was gone. Now what? He shrugged. 'Front door it is.' He made his way through the crowd.

In an alley, on one side of which ran a high stone wall, Crokus leaned against the damp bricks of a merchant's house and gazed steadily at a window. It was on the third floor, beyond the wall, and behind its shuttered face was a room he knew intimately.

There'd been a light on inside for most of the two hours he'd stood below, but for the last fifteen minutes the room within had been dark. Numb with exhaustion and plagued with doubts, Crokus pulled his cloak tighter around him. He wondered what he was doing here, and not for the first time. All his resolve seemed to have drained into the gutters along with the rain.

Had it been the dark-haired woman in the Phoenix Inn? Had she rattled him that much? The blood on her dagger made it obvious that she wouldn't hesitate to kill him just to keep her secret intact. Maybe it was the spinning

coin that had him so confused. Nothing about that incident had been natural.

What was so wrong with his dream of being introduced to the D'Arle maiden? It had nothing to do with that killer woman in the bar.

'Nothing,' he mumbled, then scowled. Now he was talking aloud to himself.

A thought came to him that deepened his scowl. Everything had begun its mad unravelling the night he'd robbed the maiden. If only he hadn't paused, if only he hadn't looked upon her soft, round, lovely face.

A groan escaped him, and he shifted his feet. A high-born. That was the real problem, wasn't it?

It all seemed so stupid now, so absurd. How could he have convinced himself that such a thing as meeting her was possible? He shook himself. It didn't matter, he'd planned this, now it was time to do it.

'I don't believe this,' he muttered as he pushed himself from the wall and headed down the alley. His hand brushed the pouch tied to his waist. 'I'm about to put a maiden's ransom back.'

He came to the stone wall he'd been looking for, and began to climb. He drew a deep breath. *All* right, *let's get it done.*

The stone was wet, but he had enough determination in him to scale a mountain. He climbed on, and did not slip even so much as a single foothold.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There's a spider here
in this corner in that –
her three eyes
tiptoe in darkness,
her eight legs
track my spine,
she mirrors and mocks
my pacing.

There's a spider here
who knows all of me
her web my history full writ.
Somewhere in this strange place
a spider waits
for my panicked flight ...

The Conspiracy
Blind Gallan (b. 1078)

As soon as the Guild assassin left the room, Kalam drained the last of his beer, paid up, and ascended the staircase. From the gallery railing he studied the crowd below, then, seeing that no one paid him much attention, he strode down the hallway and entered the last room on the right.

He closed the door and locked it. Quick Ben was seated cross-legged on the floor, within a circle of melted blue wax. The wizard was hunched over, bare-chested, his eyes shut and droplets of sweat trickling down his face. Around him the air shimmered, as if glossed with lacquer.

Kalam walked around the wax circle to the bed. He took a leather satchel from a peg above the bedpost and set it down on the thin, straw-filled mattress. Peeling back the flap he removed the contents. A minute later he'd

laid out the mechanisms for a goat's foot arbalest. The crossbow's metal parts had been blued, the narrow wooden stock soaked in pitch and dusted with black sand. Kalam slowly, quietly, assembled the weapon.

Quick Ben spoke behind him. 'Done. Whenever you're ready, friend.'

'The man left through the kitchen. But he'll be back,' Kalam said, rising with the arbalest in his hands. He attached a strap to it and slung the weapon over one shoulder. Then he faced the wizard. 'I'm ready.'

Quick Ben also stood, wiping his forehead with a sleeve. 'Two spells. You'll be able to float, control every descent. The other should give you the ability to see anything magical – well, almost anything. If there's a High Mage kicking around, we're out of luck.'

'And you?' Kalam asked, as he examined his quiver of bolts.

'You won't see me directly, just my aura,' Quick Ben replied with a grin, 'but I'll be with you all the way.'

'Well, hopefully this'll go smoothly. We make contact with the Guild, we offer the Empire's contract, they accept and remove for us every major threat in the city.' He shrugged into his black cloak and pulled up the hood.

'You sure we can't just go downstairs and walk right up to the man, lay it out?'

Kalam shook his head. 'Not how it's done. We've identified him, he's done the same with us. He's probably just made contact with his commander, and they'll arrange things to their liking. Our man should lead us now to the meet.'

'Won't it be an ambush we're walking into, then?'

The large man agreed. 'More or less. But they'll want to know what we want with them first. And once that's out, I doubt the Guild's master will be interested in killing us. You ready?'

Quick Ben raised a hand towards Kalam, then muttered briefly under his breath.

Kalam felt a lightness come into him, rising to his skin and emanating a cushion of cool air that enveloped his body. And before his eyes Quick Ben's figure formed a blue-green penumbra, concentrated at the wizard's long-fingered hands. 'I have them,' the assassin said, smiling, 'two old friends.'

Quick Ben sighed. 'Yes, here we are doing this all over again.' He met his friend's gaze. 'Hood's on our heels, Kal. I can feel his breath on my neck, these days.'

'You're not alone in that.' Kalam turned to the window. 'Sometimes,' he said drily, 'I have the feeling our Empire wants us dead.' He walked to the window, unlatched the shutters, then swung them inward and leaned both hands on the sill.

Quick Ben came up beside him and rested a hand on his shoulder. They gazed out at the darkness, a brief sharing of unease passing between them.

'We've seen too much,' Quick Ben said softly.

'Hood's Breath,' Kalam growled, 'what are we doing this for anyway?'

'Maybe if the Empire gets what it wants – Darujhistan – they'll let us slip away.'

'Sure, but who's going to convince the sergeant to walk out of the Empire?'

'We show him he hasn't got any choice.'

Kalam climbed on to the sill. 'Good thing I'm not a Claw any more. Just soldiers, right?'

Behind him Quick Ben touched his own chest and vanished. His disembodied voice held a note of wry amusement. 'Right. No more cloak-and-dagger games for old Kalam.'

The assassin pulled himself up, turning to face the wall then beginning his climb to the roof. 'Yeah, I've always hated it.'

Quick Ben's voice was beside him now. 'No more assassinations.'

'No more spying,' Kalam added, reaching for the roof's edge.

'No more disguising spells.'

Clambering on to the roof, Kalam lay still. 'No more daggers in the back,' he whispered, then sat up and scanned the nearby rooftops. He saw nothing; no unusual huddled shapes, no bright magical auras.

'Thank the gods,' came Quick Ben's whisper from above.

'Thank the gods,' Kalam echoed, then looked down over the roof's edge. Below a pool of light marked the inn entrance. 'You take the back door. I've got this one.'

'Right.'

Even as the wizard answered Kalam stiffened. 'There he is,' he hissed. 'You still with me?'

Quick Ben assented.

They watched the figure of Rallick Nom, now cloaked, crossing to the far side of the street and entering an alley.

'I'm on him,' Quick Ben said.

A blue-green glow rose around the wizard. He rose into the air and flew out swiftly across the street, slowing as he reached the alley. Kalam climbed to his feet and padded silently along the roof's edge. Reaching the corner, he glanced down to the rooftop of an adjacent building, then jumped.

He descended slowly, as if sinking through water, and landed without a sound. Off to his right, moving on a parallel path, was Quick Ben's magical aura. Kalam crossed the rooftop to the next building. Their man was heading for the harbour-front.

Kalam continued tracking Quick Ben's beacon, moving from one rooftop to the next, sometimes jumping down, at other times climbing. There was little subtlety about Kalam: where others used finesse he used the strength of his thick arms and legs. It made him an unlikely assassin, but he'd learned to use that to his advantage.

They now approached the harbour area, the buildings single-storeyed and large, the streets rarely lit except around the double-door entrances to warehouses, where the occasional private guard lingered. In the night air hung the taint of sewage and fish.

Finally, Quick Ben stopped, hovered over a warehouse courtyard, then hurried back to Kalam, who waited at the edge of a nearby two-storeyed clearing house. 'Looks like the place,' Quick Ben said, floating a few feet above Kalam. 'What now?'

'I want a good line of sight to that courtyard.'

'Follow me.'

Quick Ben led him to another building. Their man was now visible, crouching on the warehouse roof, attention down on the courtyard below.

'Kal, do you smell something bad about this?'

Kalam snorted. 'Hell, no, it's bloody roses out here. Take position, friend.'

'Right.'

Rallick Nom lay down on the rooftop, his head out over its edge. Below was the warehouse's courtyard, flat, grey and empty. Directly beneath him the shadows were impenetrable. Sweat trickled down Rallick's face.

From the shadow below came Ocelot's voice, 'He's got you in sight?'

'Yes.'

'And he's not moving?'

'No. Listen, I'm sure there's more than one of them. I would've known if he'd been trailing me, and no one was. It stinks of magery, Ocelot, and you know what I think about magery.'

'Dammit, Nom. If you'd just start using the stuff we give you, you'd rank among the best of us. But to Hood's Gate with that. We've got spotters, and unless there's a very good wizard around we'd pick up on any magic. Face

it,' a note of malice entered Ocelot's voice, 'he's better than you. He tracked you all right. Solo.'

'What now?' Rallick asked.

Ocelot chuckled. 'We're closing the circle even as we speak. Your work's done, Nom. Tonight the assassins' war ends. In five minutes you can head home.'

High above the city a demon flapped on leathery wings, its green reptilian eyes surveying the rooftops below with a vision that detected magic as easily as it did heat. Though the demon was no larger than a dog, its power was immense, near par to the man who had summoned and chained it this very night. On the rooftops it saw two auras close together, one a man on whom spells had been cast, and the other a wizard, a very good wizard. In a ragged circle on other rooftops around these two, men and women moved inward, some betrayed by the heat of their bodies, others by items imbued with sorcery.

Until now the demon rode the high night winds bored and resentful of its master. A mere mission of observation, for one of such power! But now the demon felt a surge of bloodlust. If only its master had been weaker, so that it could break the bonds and descend to the rooftops, then there would have been slaughter.

The demon was musing on these thoughts, its eyes fixed on the scene below, when a booted heel rammed into the back of its small, round head. The creature spun, tumbling, then twisted round to face its attacker, rage blazing in its skull.

A moment later it was fighting for its life. The figure that closed with the demon possessed a blinding magical aura. Grappling, the surging energies of both collided, enwrapped like tentacles. The demon struggled against the savage pain constricting it as the figure pressed its attack. A cold that burned filled the demon's skull, a cold alien in its breath of power, so alien that the demon could find no means of countering it.

The two fell slowly as they fought, duelling in absolute silence with forces invisible to the city's inhabitants below, while around them other figures descended towards the warehouse, cloaks spread like sails, crossbows crooked in their arms, hooded faces angled downward and hidden beneath black masks. There were eleven in all that passed the demon and its attacker. None of the others paid any attention, and with this realization the demon experienced an emotion it had never known before. Fear.

Its thoughts turning from battle to survival, the demon tore itself from its attacker's grasp. Loosing a high-pitched cry, it flapped upward.

The figure did not pursue, instead joining the others in their silent descent to the city.

As the twelve shrouded assassins dropped towards the circle of men and women below, one splitting off and angling above the circle's two targets, they took careful aim with their crossbows, and began a massacre.

Kalam stared down at the assassin lying supine on the roof below, wondering what to do next. Were they waiting for him to initiate contact? A low growl escaped him. Something was wrong. He could feel it like fever in his bones.

'Dammit, Quick. Let's get out of here!'

'Wait!' came Quick Ben's disembodied voice. 'Oh, damn,' he said softly then.

In front of Kalam two brightly glowing shapes dropped down on to the roof below, landing behind their mark.

'What the hell?'

Then he felt a slight tremor on the flat tiles beneath his hands. Kalam rolled on to his back, hearing a quarrel whiz past. Framed by his knees, a cloaked figure stood about thirty feet away. After missing with the quarrel

the figure raced forward. Another landed behind the first one, near the roof's far edge.

Kalam scampered. He dropped down over the roof's edge.

Quick Ben floated above him. The spell of deflection he'd raised about himself was a High Order magery, and he was certain he remained unseen by these new assailants. He watched as the approaching figure slowed, then padded cautiously to the roof edge where Kalam had dropped from sight. Daggers gleaming in both gloved hands, this new assassin reached the edge and crouched. Quick Ben held his breath as the figure leaned forward.

Kalam hadn't gone far. He gripped the roof's gables. When the attacker's upper body came into view, blotting out the stars behind it, he surged upward on the strength of one arm, his other shooting up to close on the assassin's neck with a vicelike grip. Kalam jerked the assassin downward, at the same time bringing up his knee. The attacker's cloth-wrapped face met his knee with a crunch. Kalam, still gripping the gable with one hand, gave the now limp figure a shake, then sent the body spiralling down to the street below.

Gasping, he pulled himself back on to the roof. At the far end he saw the second assassin whirl around. Growling, Kalam surged to his feet and sprinted at the figure.

The unknown assassin stepped back as if startled, then brought a hand down and promptly vanished.

Kalam slid to a stop and stood crouched, both hands hanging at his sides.

'I see her,' Quick Ben whispered.

With a hiss Kalam spun in a full circle, then danced to one side, putting his back to the roof's edge. 'I don't.'

'She's putting energy into it,' Quick Ben said. 'I keep losing her. Wait, Kal.' The wizard fell silent.

Kalam's head snapped with every muted sound. His breath gusted in and out from his nostrils, his hands twitched. Wait. A low rumble came from his

chest. Wait for what? A knife in his throat?

All at once the night exploded with sound and fire. The attacker burst into view immediately in front of Kalam, dagger flashing at his chest. Smoke and sparks rained from her but she moved as if unaffected. Kalam twisted to one side, trying to avoid the blade. The dagger tore through his shirt below his ribs, sinking deep into his flesh then ripping sideways. He felt a hot gush of blood as he drove a fist into the woman's solar plexus. She gasped, reeling back, threads of blood whipping from the dagger in her right hand. Kalam charged forward with a snarl. He closed and, ignoring the assassin's dagger, punched into her chest again. Ribs cracked. His other hand flat-palmed her forehead. The assassin sprawled backwards, landing with a thump on the roof. Her body stilled.

Kalam sank to one knee, drawing in gulps of air. 'Wait, you said, dammit! What the hell's wrong with you, Quick?' He pushed a knot of cloth into the wound below his ribcage. 'Quick?'

There was no reply. He tensed, then turned and scanned the lower rooftops. Bodies lay scattered here and there. The warehouse roof, where he'd seen two figures land behind their mark, was empty. Groaning softly, he sank down on to his knees.

With the woman's attack he'd heard something amid the flashing fires. A boom, no, two booms, very close together. An exchange of magic. His breath caught. Was there a third assassin? A wizard? Quick Ben had damaged this one, but someone else had damaged Quick Ben. 'Oh, Hood,' he whispered, glaring about.

Rallick's first intimation of trouble was a sharp blow between his shoulder blades. The breath burst from his lungs, carrying with it the ability to move. His back throbbed, and he knew he'd been hit by a quarrel, but the Jazeraint armour under his shirt had withstood the impact – the quarrel's spiked head had pierced the iron but had been too spent to push further. Through the thumping pulse in his ears he caught a pair of footsteps approaching him from behind.

From the shadows below came Ocelot's voice, 'Nom? What's happening?'

Behind Rallick the footsteps stopped, and there came the soft clacking of a crossbow being cocked. Rallick's wind returned, the numbness receding from his body. His own weapon lay beside him, ready. He waited.

'Nom?'

A soft footfall sounded behind him and to the left. In one motion Rallick rolled on to his back, grasped his crossbow, sat up and fired. The assassin, less than fifteen feet away, was thrown back by the quarrel's impact, its weapon flying.

Rallick heaved himself to one side, only now seeing the second attacker well behind the first. The figure crouched and fired its crossbow. The quarrel caught Rallick's upper chest on the right, then ricocheted up past his head to disappear into the darkness. The blow left his right arm numb. He struggled to his feet, unsheathing his knife, the hooked blade a blue flicker in the night.

The assassin opposite him took a careful step forward, then backed away to the far edge and dropped over the side.

'Hood's Breath,' came Ocelot's voice beside Rallick. He turned but saw no one.

'He saw my magic,' Ocelot said. 'Good work on the first one, Nom. Maybe we can finally determine who these people are.'

'I don't think so,' Rallick said, his eyes on the motionless body. An incandescent shimmer now wreathed it.

As the body disappeared Ocelot cursed. 'Some kind of recall spell,' he said. Suddenly the Clan Master appeared in front of Rallick. His face twisted into a snarl as he glared about. 'We set the trap, we end up dead.'

Rallick did not reply. He reached over his shoulder, pulled out the quarrel and tossed it to one side. The trappers had become the trapped, that was true, but he felt certain that the man who'd followed him had nothing to do with these newcomers. He turned and gazed up at the roof where his

follower had been stationed. Even as he watched there was a flash of red and yellow light and a double thunderclap, and in that instant Rallick saw a silhouetted figure at the roof's edge, defending itself from a frontal attack. The flash winked out leaving only darkness.

'Magery,' Ocelot whispered. 'High-power stuff, too. Come on, we're getting out of here.'

They left quickly, climbing down into the warehouse court.

Once she had marked them, Sorry could find the fat little man and the Coin Bearer effortlessly. Though she'd intended to trail this Kruppe after leaving Kalam and Quick Ben in the hut, something had drawn her instead to the boy. A suspicion, a sense that his actions were – at least for now – more important than Kruppe's meanderings.

The Coin Bearer was the last of Oponn's influence, and the god's most vital player in the game. Thus far, she'd done well in eliminating the other potential players – men like Captain Paran, who had been the Adjunct's aide and, by extension, a servant to the Empress. And there had been that Claw Leader in Pale, the one she had garotted. On her path to the Bridgeburners, others had been removed as well, but only as necessary.

She knew that the boy would have to die, yet something within her seemed to be fighting that conclusion, and it was a part of her she could not recognize. She'd been taken, born a killer two years ago on a coastal road. The body she dwelt within was convenient, suitably unmarred by the events of a dramatic life – a young girl's body, a young girl whose mind was no match for the power that overwhelmed it, obliterated it.

But was it obliterated? What had the coin touched inside her? And whose voice was this that spoke with such power and determination in her head? It had come upon her before, when Whiskeyjack had uttered the word Seer.

She tried hard to remember any dealings she might have had with a seer in the last two years, but none came to mind.

She pulled her cloak tighter about her shoulders. Finding the boy had been easy, but as to what he was up to, that was another matter. On the surface it looked no more complicated than a simple theft. Crokus had stood in an alley studying a lighted window on the third floor of an estate, waiting until the light went out. Wrapped in unnatural shadows as she was, he had not seen her as he scaled the slick wall she leaned against. He climbed with impressive grace and skill.

After he'd gone she found another vantage-point, which allowed her full view of the room's balcony and sliding doors. This had meant entering the estate's garden. But there had been only one guard, patrolling the grounds. She'd killed him effortlessly and now stood beneath a tree with her eyes on the balcony.

Crokus had already reached it, had picked the lock and entered the room beyond. He was quite good, she had to admit. But what thief would then spend close to half an hour in the chamber he was robbing? Half an hour and still counting. She'd heard no alarms, seen no lights spring to life behind any of the estate's other windows, nothing to indicate that anything had gone wrong. So what was Crokus doing in there?

Sorry stiffened. Sorcery had burgeoned in another part of Darujhistan, and its flavour was known to her. She hesitated, unable to decide. Leave the lad and investigate this new, deadly emanation? Or remain here until Crokus re-emerged or was discovered?

Then she saw something behind the balcony's sliding doors that ended her indecision.

Sweat ran down Crokus's face and he found he had repeatedly to wipe it from his eyes. He'd beaten the new triggers to get inside – the one on the balcony, the trip-wire at the latch – and now padded to the makeup table. Once there he froze, unable to move. *Idiot! What am 1 doing here?*

He listened to her soft, regular breathing behind him – *like the breath of a dragon* – he was certain he could feel it gusting against the back of his neck. Crokus looked up and scowled at his own reflection in the mirror.

What was happening to him? If he didn't leave soon ... He began to remove his bag's contents. When he'd finished he glanced again at his own face – to see another behind it, a round, white face watching him from the bed.

The girl spoke. 'Since you're putting it all back, I'd prefer the proper arrangement. My makeup jar goes to the left of the mirror,' she said, in a whisper. 'The hairbrush goes to the right. Have you my earrings as well? Just leave them on the dresser.'

Crokus groaned. He'd even forgotten to cover his face. 'Don't try anything,' he growled. 'I've returned everything, and now I'll leave. Understand?'

The girl pulled her blankets about her and moved to the bed's end. 'Threats won't work, thief,' she said. 'All I need do is scream and my father's Master Guardsman will be here in seconds. Would you cross your dagger with his shortsword?'

'No,' said Crokus. 'I'd put it to your throat instead. With you as a hostage, with you between me and the guard, will he swing his blade at me? Unlikely.'

The girl paled. 'As a thief, you'd lose a hand. But kidnapping a high-born, it'd be the high gallows for you.'

Crokus tried to shrug casually. He glanced at the balcony, gauging how fast he could be outside and then up on the roof. That new trip-wire was a nuisance.

'Stay where you are,' the girl commanded. 'I'm lighting a lantern.'

'Why?' Crokus demanded, fidgeting.

'To see you better,' she replied, and light bloomed in the room from the lantern in her lap.

He scowled. He hadn't noticed it there, so close at hand. She was ruining his plans even as he made them. 'What's the point in seeing me better?' he snarled. 'Just call your damn guards and have me arrested. Be done with it.'

He pulled the silk turban from his shirt and dropped it on the tabletop. 'That's all of it,' he said.

The girl glanced at the turban and shrugged easily. 'That was to be part of my costume for the Fete,' she said. 'I've since found a nicer one.'

'What,' he hissed, 'do you want with me?'

Fear showed momentarily on her face at his desperate outburst, then she smiled. 'I wish to know why a thief who succeeded in stealing all my jewels should now be returning them. That isn't something thieves usually do.'

'With good reason,' he muttered, more to himself than to her. He stepped forward then stopped as she jerked back on to her bed, her eyes widening. Crokus raised a hand. 'Sorry, didn't mean to frighten you. Only ... I want to see you better. That's all.'

'Why?'

He was at a loss for an answer to that. After all, he couldn't very well tell her he'd fallen madly in love with her. 'What's your name?' he blurted.

'Challice D'Arle. What's yours?'

Challice. 'Of course,' he said, rolling his eyes. 'You would be named something like that.' He glared at her. 'My name? None of your business. Thieves don't introduce themselves to their victims.'

Her eyebrows rose. 'Victim? But I'm no longer a victim, am I? You've settled that by returning. I'd think,' she said slyly, 'you're more or less obliged to tell me your name, considering what you're doing. And you must be the type who treats obligations seriously, no matter how strange they seem.'

Crokus frowned at that. What was she talking about? What did she know about how he looked at obligations? And why was she right? 'My name,' he sighed, defeated, 'is Crokus Younghand. And you're the daughter of the high born D'Arle who all those suitors are lining up to be introduced to. But one day you'll see me in that line, Challice, and only you will know where you

last saw me. It'll be a formal introduction, and I'll bring a gift as is correct.' He stared at her, horrified by his own words.

Her wide eyes held his, emotion bright in them – emotion he'd no hope of understanding – then she burst out laughing. She immediately clapped a hand over her mouth, then jolted forward on the bed. 'You'd better go, Crokus. Someone will have heard me. Quickly, and beware the trip-wire!'

Crokus moved woodenly to the balcony's sliding doors. Her laughter had been the final punctuation to all his dreams. He felt dead inside, except for a cynic's chuckle that might have been his own, given the odd look she threw him. Her blankets had fallen down around her, and once again she was naked. It astonished him in a distant way that she hadn't even seemed to notice.

A voice came from beyond the door leading to the hallway, indistinct.

The girl hissed, 'Hurry, you fool!'

Alarm bells jangled in his head, awakening him. He had to move, and fast. Crokus stepped over the trip-wire and opened the door. He paused to glance back at her, and smiled as she clutched the blankets to her neck. Well, at least he'd won that much.

A knock sounded on the opposite door.

Crokus emerged on to the balcony and hitched himself up on to the railing. He looked down into the garden and almost fell. The guard was gone. In his place stood a woman – and, though she was cloaked, something about her triggered instant recognition. The woman from the bar, and she was looking right at him with dark eyes that burned him deep inside.

The door in the room opened and Crokus shook himself. *Damn that woman, anyway! Damn both of them!* He grasped the eaves above his head and swung lithely up and out of sight.

Kalam crouched motionless in the middle of the rooftop, a knife in each hand. Around him was silence, the night air tense and heavy. Long minutes

passed. At times he convinced himself he was alone, that Quick Ben and the other wizard had left the roof; that they hunted each other in the sky overhead, or in the alleys and streets below, or on another roof. But then he'd hear something, a drawn breath, a scuff of cloth against leather, or a wisp of wind would brush his cheek on this windless night.

Then, before his eyes, the darkness was shattered. Two shapes appeared hovering over the rooftop. The assassin had found Quick Ben, attacking with a bolt of fire that seemed to stun the wizard, then swiftly closing the distance between himself and the dazed man.

Kalam surged forward to intercept. Quick Ben vanished then reappeared immediately behind the assassin. The blue flash of power bursting from the wizard's hands struck the magic-wielding assassin full in the back. Clothes aflame, the man tumbled through the air.

Quick Ben whirled to Kalam. 'Come on! Get moving!'

Kalam ran, his friend flying beside him. As they reached the roof's edge he turned for a last look. The assassin mage had somehow snuffed the fire from his clothes and was regaining his balance. At the far edge two of his comrades appeared.

'Jump,' Quick Ben said. 'I'll stall them.'

'With what?' Kalam demanded, tottering on the edge.

In answer Quick Ben produced a small vial. He spun in the air and hurled it.

Kalam cursed, then jumped.

The vial struck the rooftop and shattered with a thin tinkle. Beyond, the three assassins paused. Quick Ben remained, his eyes on the white smoke rising from the glass shards. A figure took form within the smoke, growing in size. Its shape was almost insubstantial, the smoke stretching like threads in places, curling like wool in others. All that was visible within it was its eyes, two black slits, which it swung to Quick Ben.

'You,' it said, its voice that of a child, 'are not Master Tayschrenn.'

'That's right,' Quick Ben said, 'but I'm in his legion. Your service remains with the Empire.' He pointed across the roof. 'There are three who are the Empire's enemies, Demon. Tiste Andii, here to oppose the Malazan Empire.'

'My name is Pearl,' the Korvalah demon said softly, then turned to the three assassins, who had spread out along the far edge. 'They are not fleeing,' Pearl said, with a note of surprise.

Quick Ben wiped sweat from his forehead. He glanced down. Kalam was a vague shape waiting in the alley below. 'I know,' he said to Pearl. That observation had unnerved him as well. One of Tayschrenn's Korvalahrai could level a city if it so chose.

'They accept my challenge,' Pearl said, facing Quick Ben again. 'Should I pity them?'

'No,' he answered. 'Just kill them and be done with it.'

'Then I return to Master Tayschrenn.'

'Yes.'

'What is your name, Wizard?'

He hesitated, then said, 'Ben Adaephon Delat.'

'You are supposed to be dead,' Pearl said. 'Your name is so marked on the scrolls of those High Mages who fell to the Empire in Seven Cities.'

Quick Ben glanced up. 'Others are coming, Pearl. You are in for a fight.'

The demon lifted its gaze. Above them glowing figures descended, five in the first wave, one in the second. This last one radiated such power that Quick Ben shrank back, his blood chilled. The figure had something long and narrow strapped to its back.

'Ben Adaephon Delat,' Pearl said plaintively, 'see the last who comes. You send me to my death.'

'I know,' Quick Ben whispered.

'Flee, then. I will hold them enough to ensure your escape, no more.'

Quick Ben sank down past the roof.

Before he passed from sight Pearl spoke again. 'Ben Adaephon Delat, do you pity me?'

'Yes,' he replied softly, then pivoted and dropped down into darkness.

Rallick walked down the centre of the street. On either side of the wide corridor rose columns from which gas torches jutted, casting circles of blue light on to the wet cobblestones. The light rain had returned, coating everything in a slick sheen. To his right and beyond the resident houses lining that side of the street, the pale domes of the High Thalanti on the hill glistened against the deep grey sky.

The temple was among the oldest structures in the city, its founding blocks over two thousand years old. The Thalanti monks had come, like so many others, carried on the wings of the rumour. Rallick knew less about the story than did Murillio and Coll. One of the Elder Peoples was believed to have been entombed among the hills, an individual of great wealth and power, that was the extent of his knowledge.

But it had been a rumour with many consequences. If not for the thousands of shafts sunk into the earth the caverns of gas would never have been found. And while many of those shafts had collapsed or had been forgotten over the centuries, still others remained, now connected by tunnels.

In one of the many chambers that honeycombed the ground beneath the temple waited Vorcan, Master of Assassins. Rallick imagined Ocelot making his descent, burdened with the news of disaster, and it brought a smile to his lean face. He'd never met Vorcan, but Ocelot suited those catacombs – just another of the city's rats rushing about beneath his feet.

One day, Rallick knew, he'd become a Clan Leader, he'd meet Vorcan face to face somewhere below. He wondered at how it would change him, and travelling down this path soured his thoughts with displeasure.

He had no option. Once, he thought, as he approached the block of the Phoenix Inn, long ago, there'd been choices he could have made that would have sent him on a different path. But those days were dead, and the future held only nights, a stretch of darkness that led down to the eternal dark. He would meet Vorcan, eventually, and he'd swear his life to the Guild Master, and that would be that, the closing of the final door.

And his sense of outrage at the injustices around him, the corruptions of the world, would wither in the unlit tunnels beneath Darujhistan. In the exactness of the methods of assassination, his final victim would be himself.

And this, more than anything, made his and Murillio's scheme the last act of humanity he'd ever make. Betrayal was the greatest of all crimes in Rallick's mind, for it took all that was human within a person and made it a thing of pain. In the face of that, murder itself was surcease: it was quick, and it ended the anguish and despair of a life without hope. If all went as planned, Lady Simtal and those men who'd conspired with her in the betrayal of her husband, Lord Coll, would die. Could that right the wrong, could it even the scales of retribution? No, but it might return to a man his life and his hope.

For himself, Rallick, such gifts had long since been lost, and he was not the kind of man to stir the ashes. No embers survived, no flame could be born anew. Life belonged to other people, and his only claim to it was his power to take it from them. Nor would he recognize hope if it came to him. Too much a stranger, too long a ghost.

As he neared the inn's entrance, Rallick saw Crokus approaching from down the street. He increased his pace. 'Crokus,' he called.

The boy flinched, then, seeing Rallick, he stopped and waited.

Rallick took his arm and steered him towards the alley without saying a word. Once in the shadows he tightened his grip, swung Crokus round and pulled him close. 'Listen to me,' he hissed, his face inches from the boy's own astonished visage, 'the Guild's best were slaughtered tonight. This isn't a game. You stay off the rooftops, do you understand me?'

Crokus nodded.

'And tell your uncle this. There's a Claw in the city.'

The boy's eyes widened.

'And,' Rallick continued, 'there's someone else. Someone coming down from the sky, killing everything in sight.'

'Uncle Mammot?'

'Just tell him. And now listen carefully, Crokus. What I'm about to say is from me to you, one to one, understand?'

Crokus nodded again, his face pale.

'You stay on this path and you'll end up dead. I don't give a damn how exciting it all seems – what's excitement to you is desperation to others. Stop feeding off the city's lifeblood, lad. There's no hero's role in sucking others dry. Am I understood?'

'Yes,' Crokus whispered.

Rallick released the boy's arm and stepped back. 'Now, leave.' He shoved Crokus up the street, watched the boy stagger away and disappear around a corner. He drew a deep breath, surprised to find his hands trembling as he loosened his cloak's collar.

Murillio stepped from the shadows. 'I'm not sure it'll work, friend, but it was a good try.' He laid a hand on the assassin's shoulder. 'Master Baruk has a job for us. Kruppe insists we bring Crokus along.'

Rallick frowned. 'Along? Are we leaving Darujhistan, then?'

'Afraid so.'

'Go without me,' Rallick said. 'Tell Baruk I can't be found. Everything's at a critical juncture – our planning included.'

'Something else happening, Nom?'

'You heard the message I gave Crokus for his uncle?'

Murillio shook his head. 'I came late to your scene. Saw you dragging the lad into the alley.'

'Well,' Rallick said, 'let's go inside. It's been a night to make Hood smile, friend.'

Together, the two men strode from the alley. In the street outside the Phoenix Inn, dawn's light crept through the mists of the lingering rain.

In the centre of the rooftop lay a large patch of ash and bone that crackled faintly and cast out the occasional hissing spark. Anomander Rake slammed his sword into its sheath. 'I sent twelve of you,' he said, to the black-caped figure standing beside him, 'and I see but eight. What happened, Serrat?'

The Tiste Andii woman was clearly exhausted. 'We've been working hard, Lord.'

'Details,' Rake said abruptly.

Serrat sighed. 'Jekaral has a broken neck and three cracked ribs. Boruld's face is a mess, broken nose, broken cheekbone, broken jaw—'

'Who were they fighting?' Rake asked, turning to his lieutenant in exasperation. 'Has the Guild Master come out of hiding?'

'No, Lord. Both Jekaral and Boruld fell to a single man, not of the city's Guild.'

Rake's eyes flashed dangerously. 'Claw?'

'Possibly. He was accompanied by a High Mage. The one who gave us this Kprvalah to play with.'

'It had the smell of Empire about it,' Rake muttered, his gaze on the smouldering patch that had begun to eat its way into the roof. 'One of Tayschrenn's conjurings, I should think.' A savage grin flashed. 'Pity to have disturbed his sleep this night.'

'Dashtal was struck by a poisoned quarrel,' Serrat said. 'One of the Guild's assassins managed that.' She hesitated. 'Lord. We were hard pressed in

Brood's campaign. We're in need of rest. Mistakes were made this night. Some of the Guild slipped through our fingers and, had you not answered my request, we would have suffered more casualties destroying this demon.'

Rake placed his hands on his hips and surveyed the morning sky. After a moment he sighed. 'Ah, Serrat. Don't think me insensitive. But the Guild Master must be flushed. This Guild must be shut down.' He eyed his lieutenant. 'This Claw you encountered, do you think a meet was being established?'

'Not a meet,' Serrat answered. 'A trap.'

Rake nodded. 'Good.' He paused, his eyes matching Serrat's with a shade of violet. 'Return to Moon's Spawn, then. Have the High Priestess herself attend to Jekaral.'

Serrat bowed. 'Thank you, Lord.' She turned and gestured to the others.

'Oh,' Rake said, raising his voice to address his cadre of assassin-mages, 'one last thing. You've done well, exceptionally well. You've earned a rest. Three days and nights are yours to do with as you please.'

Serrat bowed again. 'We will mourn, Lord.'

'Mourn?'

'The poisoned quarrel killed Dashtal. The poison was the product of an alchemist, Lord. One of some ability. It contained paralt.'

'I see.'

'Will you return with us?'

'No.'

The lieutenant bowed a third time. As one, the eight Tiste Andii raised their hands, then vanished.

Rake glanced down at the sizzling patch just as it ate through the roof and fell into darkness. There came a faint crash from below. Lord Anomander Rake swung his gaze back to the sky, then sighed.

Sergeant Whiskeyjack rocked his chair on to its back two legs and anchored it against the crumbling wall. The small, dingy room reeked of urine and damp. Two single beds, wood-framed with burlap mattresses stuffed with straw, ran along the wall to his left. The three other rickety chairs had been pulled up around the lone table in the room's centre. Above the table hung an oil lantern, which shone down on Fiddler, Hedge and Mallet as they sat playing cards.

They'd done their work, finishing with the coming of dusk just outside Majesty Hall. Until the alliance with the Moranth, the Malazan saboteur had been nothing more than a glorified sapper, a digger of tunnels and breaker of city gates. Moranth alchemy had introduced to the Empire a variety of chemical and powder explosives, most of which detonated when exposed to air. Applying a slow-working acid worm-holed the unfired clay shells. Sabotage had become an art, the precise equation of clay thickness and acid strength was tricky, and few survived to learn from their mistakes.

To Whiskeyjack's mind, Hedge and Fiddler were terrible soldiers. He had trouble recalling the last time they'd unsheathed their shortswords. Whatever discipline that had been part of their basic training had disintegrated through years in the field. Still, when it came to sabotage they had no equals.

Through hooded eyes Whiskeyjack studied the three men sitting at the table. It had been some minutes since any of them had made a move or said a word. One of Fiddler's new games, he decided, the man was forever inventing new ones, improvising the rules whenever they gave him an edge. Despite the endless arguments Fiddler was never short of players.

'And that's what boredom can do,' he said to himself. But, no, it was more than just boredom. Waiting gnawed, especially when it had to do with friends. Quick Ben and Kalam might be face down in some alley for all they knew. And that made it hard.

Whiskeyjack's gaze strayed to one of the beds, on which lay his armour and longsword. Rust stained the hauberk's tattered chain like old blood. The

links were missing in some places, torn in others. In his bones and muscles the memory of that damage remained: every cut, every blow now haunted him with aches, greeting him each morning like old comrades. The sword, with its plain leather-wrapped grip and stub hilt, lay in its hide-over-wood scabbard, the belt and straps draped over the bedside.

That weapon had come to him after his first battle, found amid a field of dead. He'd still had the chalk of his father's quarry on his boots then, and a world's promise stretched out before him on the banners of Empire. The sword had come to him shiny, without even so much as a nick in its honed blade, and he had taken it as his own personal standard.

Whiskeyjack's gaze lost its focus. His mind had stepped into the grey, muddy tracks of his youth, where he walked the familiar path, lost and blinded by an unidentifiable sorrow.

The door flew open, carrying into the room a gust of steamy air and then Trotts. The Barghast's coal-dark eyes met the sergeant's.

Whiskeyjack stood quickly. He went to the bed and retrieved his sword. At the table the others remained intent on their card game, their only betrayal of anxiety a subtle shifting of chairs. Whiskeyjack pushed past Trotts and closed the door to a crack, through which he looked. Across the street, at the mouth of an alley, two figures crouched, the larger leaning heavily against the other. Whiskeyjack's breath hissed through his teeth. 'Mallet,' he said over his shoulder.

At the table the healer frowned at the two saboteurs, then carefully set down his cards.

The two figures in the alley crossed the street. Whiskeyjack's hand crept to grip his sword.

'Which?' Mallet asked, as he rearranged the blankets on one of the beds.

'Kalam,' the sergeant replied. The two men reached the door and he swung it wide to let them through, then shut it again. He beckoned at Trotts, who walked over to the curtained window, pulling back a corner to watch the street.

Kalam was pale, sagging against Quick Ben. The assassin's dark grey shirt was soaked with blood. Mallet moved to help the wizard and together they carried Kalam to the bed. As soon as the healer had him laid out, he waved Quick Ben away and began removing Kalam's shirt.

Quick Ben shook his head at Whiskeyjack and sat down in the chair Mallet had occupied. 'What's the game?' he asked, picking up Mallet's cards and frowning as he studied them.

Neither Hedge nor Fiddler replied.

'No idea,' Whiskeyjack said, as he walked over to stand behind Mallet. 'They just sit and stare.'

Quick Ben grinned. 'Ah, a waiting game, right, Fid?' He leaned back comfortably and stretched out his legs.

Mallet glanced up at the sergeant. 'He'll be down for a while,' the healer said. 'The wound is clean, but he's lost a lot of blood.'

Crouching, Whiskeyjack studied the assassin's pallid face. Kalam's gaze remained sharp, focused on the sergeant. 'Well?' Whiskeyjack demanded. 'What happened?'

Quick Ben answered behind him. 'Had a bit of a mage duel out there.'

Kalam nodded in confirmation.

'And?' Whiskeyjack asked, straightening to glare at the wizard.

Quick Ben wilted slightly in his chair. 'It went sour. I had to release an Empire demon to get us out alive.'

Everyone in the room went still. At the window Trotts turned and made a tribal warding gesture, tracing the woad lines on his face.

Whiskeyjack's voice was soft. 'It's loose in the city?'

'No,' the wizard answered. 'It's dead.'

'Who did you run into?' Whiskeyjack bellowed, throwing up his hands.

'Not sure exactly,' Quick Ben said quietly. 'Whatever it was, it took care of the demon in less than a minute. I heard the death cry when we were only a block away. Assassin mages, Sergeant, coming down out of the sky. Seemed intent on wiping out the city's Guild.'

Whiskeyjack returned to his chair and dropped into it, the wood complaining beneath him. 'From the sky. Tiste Andii.'

'Yes,' Quick Ben muttered. 'We thought that. The sorcery had that flavour. Old, dark and icy cold. Kurald Galain.'

'From what we saw,' Kalam added, 'they did a damn good job. No contact established, Sergeant. It was messy up there.'

'So the Moon's active here.' Whiskeyjack paused, then pounded his fist on the chair's arm. 'Worse, the Moon's lord is a move ahead of us. He reckoned we'd try to contact the Guild, so what does he do?'

'Takes out the Guild,' Kalam said. 'How's that for arrogance?'

'Whatever arrogance that lord has,' Whiskeyjack said, grimacing, 'he's earned it. I'll give him that. I wonder how good this city's Guild Master is – good enough to take on Tiste Andii? Unlikely.'

'And about the other thing,' Quick Ben said. 'It worked.'

The sergeant stared at the wizard for half a dozen seconds, then nodded.

'We also ran into Sorry,' Kalam said, wincing as Mallet pressed a hand on his wound. The healer muttered under his breath.

'Oh? I sent her after some fat man she thought was important. How come she ran into you two?'

Quick Ben's brows had risen. 'So she told the truth, then. We don't know how she found us, but she'd found the man we were looking for – and gave him to us.'

Mallet raised his hand. Where the wound had been there was now a pink scar. Kalam grunted his thanks and sat up.

Whiskeyjack tapped his fingers against the chair's arm. 'If we only knew who was running this damn city, we could try it ourselves.'

The assassin sniffed. 'If we start taking out Council members, maybe we'll flush out the real rulers.'

The sergeant frowned. 'Not bad,' he said, rising to his feet. 'Work on that. The Moon's lord knows we're here, now, with that demon popping up. We'll have to move fast.'

Fiddler spoke up, 'We could blow up Majesty Hall,' he said, smirking at Hedge.

'You've got enough munitions to manage that?' Whiskeyjack asked.

Fiddler's face fell. 'Well, uh, we've got enough to take out an estate, maybe. But if we pull up some of the mines we planted ...'

Whiskeyjack sighed. 'This is getting absurd. No, we leave things as they are.' He watched the non-existent card game. It seemed to involve complete immobility. A stand-off. The sergeant's eyes narrowed. Were they trying to tell him something?

Orange and yellow hues lit the eastern horizon, casting a coppery sheen upon the city's bricks and cobbles. Apart from the dripping of water the streets were quiet, though the first emergings of citizenry were minutes away. Soon those farmers who had depleted their supplies of grains, fruits and root crops would take to their carts and wagons and depart the city. Merchant shops and stalls would open to catch the morning wave of shoppers.

Throughout Darujhistan the Greyfaces prepared to shut the valves feeding gas to the torches lining the major avenues. These figures moved in small groups, gathering at intersections then dispersing with the day's first bell.

Sorry watched Crokus wearily ascend a tenement's front steps. She stood half a block down the street, within shadows that seemed reluctant to disappear despite the growing light.

A short while earlier, she'd felt the Empire demon's death strike her almost physically, deep in her chest. Normally demons fled back to their realm once enough damage had been inflicted on them, enough to sever the links of summoning. But the Korvalah had not been simply cut down, or forcibly dismissed. There'd been a finality to its end that had left her shaken. A death in truth. She still recalled its silent, despairing scream ringing in her head.

All the ambivalence surrounding the Coin Bearer was gone, driven away. She knew now she would kill him. It had to be done, and soon. All that remained before she could do so was the mystery of his actions. To what extent was Oponn using the boy?

She knew he'd seen her in the D'Arles' garden, just before he'd escaped to the estate's roof. Seeing the light come on behind the balcony's sliding doors had clinched her decision to continue following Crokus. The D'Arle family was powerful in Darujhistan. That the boy seemed to be involved in a clandestine love affair with the daughter was an outrageous proposition, yet what else could she conclude? So, the question remained: was Oponn working through the boy directly, insinuating a peculiar influence with the City Council? What powers of influence did this young maiden possess?

Only a matter of position, of possible scandal. Yet what was the political position of Councilman Estraysian D'Arle? Sorry realized that even though she'd learned much of Darujhistan's political arena she still did not know enough to second-guess Oponn's moves. Councilman D'Arle was Turban Orr's principal opposition on this proclamation-of-neutrality business – but what did that matter? The Malazan Empire could not care less. Unless the proclamation was no more than a feint. Was this Turban Orr seeking to lay the groundwork for an Empire-backed coup?

The answers to such questions would be slow in coming. She knew she'd have to exercise patience. Of course, patience was her finest quality. She'd hoped that showing herself to Crokus a second time, there in the garden, might trigger panic in the lad – or, at the very least, annoy Oponn if indeed the god's control was as direct as that.

Sorry had watched on, from the shadows she drew around her, as the assassin named Rallick took the lad to task. She'd also lingered to catch the conversation between Rallick and Murillio. It seemed the boy had protectors, and an odd lot they were, assuming that the fat little man, Kruppe, was some kind of group leader. Hearing that they were to take Crokus out of the city on behalf of their 'master' made the whole situation even more intriguing.

She knew she'd have to make her move soon. The protection offered by Kruppe and this Murillio would not impede her much, she expected. Though Kruppe was certainly more than he seemed, violence hardly seemed his major skill.

She would kill Crokus, then, outside the city. As soon as she discovered the nature of their mission, and who their master was. As soon as everything had fallen into place.

Sergeant Whiskeyjack would have to wait a while longer for her return. Sorry smiled at that, knowing full well how relieved the whole squad would be that she was nowhere to be seen. As for that whole matter – the threat presented by Quick Ben and Kalam – well, everything in its own time.

Alchemist Baruk's savage migraine was ebbing. Whatever presence had been unleashed in the city was gone. He sat in his reading chair, pressing a cloth-wrapped chunk of ice against his forehead. It had been a conjuring. He felt certain of that. The emanations stank of demonry. But there'd been more. The moment before the presence vanished, Baruk had experienced a mental wrench that came close to driving him into unconsciousness.

He'd shared the creature's final death scream, his own shriek echoing down the hall and bringing his men-at-arms shouting to his bedroom door.

Baruk felt a wrongness, deep within him, as if his soul had been battered. For a single, brief second, he'd looked upon a world of absolute darkness, and from that darkness came sounds, the creak of wooden wheels, the clank of chains, the groans of a thousand imprisoned souls. Then it was gone, and

he found himself sitting in his chair, Roald kneeling at his side with a pail of ice from the cellar.

He now sat in his study, alone, and the ice pressed against his brow was warm compared to what he felt in his heart.

There was a knock at the door, and Roald entered, his face creased with worry. 'Lord, you have a visitor.'

'I have? At this hour?' He rose shakily to his feet. 'Who is it?'

'Lord Anomander Rake.' Roald hesitated. 'And ... another.'

Frowning, Baruk waved a hand. 'Bring them in.'

'Yes, Lord.'

Rake entered, holding a dog-sized winged creature by the nape of its neck. The creature twisted and hissed, then turned pleading eyes to Baruk.

'This thing was following me here,' Rake said. 'Yours?'

Startled, Baruk managed a nod.

'I thought as much,' Rake said, releasing the demon to flap across the room and land at the alchemist's slippered feet.

Baruk gazed down on it. The demon was trembling.

Rake strode to a chair and sat, stretching out his long legs. 'A busy night,' he said.

Baruk gestured and the demon vanished with a faint popping sound. 'Indeed,' he said, his voice hard. 'My servant was on a mission. I had no idea it would involve you.' He went to stand before the Tiste Andii. 'Why were you in the middle of an assassin war?'

'Why not?' Rake answered. 'I started it.'

'What?'

He smiled up at Baruk. 'You don't know the Empress as well as I do, Baruk.'

'Please explain.' Colour had risen in the alchemist's face.

Rake looked away. 'Tell me this, Baruk,' he said, turning to meet the alchemist's gaze, 'who in this city is most likely to be aware of your secret council? And who might benefit the most from your removal? And, most importantly, who in this city is capable of killing you?'

Baruk did not answer immediately. He walked slowly to the table, where a newly painted map had been laid out. He leaned over it, hands resting on the edge. 'You suspect the Empress might seek out Vorcan,' he said. 'A contract to offer.'

'On you and the rest of the High Mages,' Rake said, behind him. 'The Empress has sent a Claw here, not so much to worry your city's defences, but to establish contact with the Master Assassin. I wasn't entirely certain that I was right in this, but I meant to prevent that contact.'

Baruk's eyes remained on the map's red wash. 'So you sent your own assassins to wipe out her Guild. To flush her out.' He faced Rake. 'And then what? Kill her? All on the basis of some suspicion of yours?'

'This night,' Rake said calmly, 'we prevented the Claw from making that contact. Your demon's report will confirm this. Besides, you aren't suggesting that the death of Vorcan and the decimation of the city's assassins is a bad thing, are you?'

'I fear I am.' Baruk was pacing, struggling against a growing sense of outrage. 'I may not know the Empress as well as you, Rake,' he said, gritting his teeth, 'but I do know this city – far better than you ever will.' He glared at the Tiste Andii. 'To you, Darujhistan is just another battleground for your private war with the Empress. You don't give a damn about how this city survives – how it has managed to survive three thousand years.'

Rake shrugged. 'Enlighten me.'

'The City Council has its function, a vital one. They are the city's machine. True, Majesty Hall is a place of pettiness, corruption, endless bickering but, despite all that, it's also a place where things get done.'

'What's that got to do with Vorcan and her gang of killers?'

Baruk grimaced. 'Like any burdened wagon, the wheels require grease. Without the option of assassination the noble families would have long since destroyed themselves, taking the city with them, through civil war. Secondly, the Guild's efficiency provides a measure of control on vendettas, arguments and so forth. It is the guaranteed option of bloodshed, and bloodshed is messy. Usually too messy for the nobility's sensibilities.'

'Curious,' Rake said. 'Nevertheless, don't you think that Vorcan would listen very carefully indeed to an offer from the Empress? After all, Laseen has the precedent of handing over the rule of a conquered city to an assassin. In fact, at least a third of her present High Fists come from that profession.'

'You are missing the point!' Baruk's face was dark. 'You did not consult us, and that cannot be tolerated.'

'You haven't answered me,' Rake retorted, in a voice quiet and cold. 'Would Vorcan take the contract? Could she manage it? Is she that good, Baruk?'

The alchemist turned away. 'I don't know. That's my answer, to all three questions.'

Rake stared hard at Baruk. 'If you were indeed nothing more than an alchemist, I might believe you.'

Baruk's smile was wry. 'Why would you think me anything but?'

Now it was Rake's turn to smile. 'There are few who would argue with me without flinching. I am unused to be addressed as an equal.'

'There are many paths to Ascendancy, some more subtle than others.' Baruk walked over to the mantel above the fireplace, took a carafe, then went to the shelf behind his desk and retrieved two crystal goblets. 'She's a High Mage. We all have magical defences, but against her...' He filled the goblets with wine.

Rake joined the alchemist. He accepted the glass and raised it between them. 'I apologize for not informing you. In truth, the thought hadn't crossed my mind as being especially important. Until tonight, I was acting on a

theory, nothing more. I didn't consider the ripples a grounded Guild might cause.'

Baruk sipped his wine. 'Anomander Rake, tell me something. There was a presence in our city tonight – a conjuring.'

'One of Tayschrenn's Korvalah demons,' Rake answered. 'Released by a Claw wizard.' He took a mouthful of the tart liquid, let it roll for a moment, then swallowed with satisfaction. 'It's gone.'

'Gone?' Baruk asked quietly. 'Where?'

'Out of Tayschrenn's reach,' Rake said, a tight smile on his lips. 'Out of anyone's reach.'

'Your sword,' Baruk said, repressing a shiver as the memory of that closing vision returned to him. The creak of wheels, the clank of chains, the groans of a thousand lost souls. And darkness.

'Oh, yes,' Rake said, refilling his goblet. 'I received the two Pale wizards' heads. As you promised. I admire your efficiency, Baruk. Did they protest?'

Baruk paled. 'I explained to them the options,' he said quietly. 'No, they didn't protest.'

Rake's soft laugh chilled the blood in Baruk's veins.

At the distant sound Kruppe rose. The small fire flickered steadily before him, but its heat seemed less. 'Ah,' he sighed, 'Kruppe's hands are near numb, yet his ears are as sharp as ever. Listen to this faint sound in the very nether regions of his present dream. Does he know its source?'

'Perhaps,' K'rul said beside him.

Startled, Kruppe turned, his eyebrows rising. 'Kruppe thought you long gone, Eldering One. None the less, he is thankful for your company.'

The hooded god nodded. 'All is well with the child Tattersail. The Rhivi protect her, and she grows swiftly, as is the nature of Soletaken. A powerful warlord now shelters her.'

'Good,' Kruppe said, smiling. The noises in the distance drew his attention again. He stared out into the darkness, seeing nothing.

'Tell me, Kruppe,' K'rul said, 'what do you hear?'

'The passing of a great wagon or some such thing,' he replied, with a frown. 'I hear its wheels, and chains, and the groaning of slaves.'

'Its name is Dragnipur,' K'rul said. 'And it is a sword.'

Kruppe's frown deepened. 'How can a wagon and slaves be a sword?'

'Forged in darkness, it chains souls to the world that existed before the coming of light. Kruppe, its wielder is among you.'

In Kruppe's mind his Deck of Dragons rose. He saw the image of half man, half dragon – the Knight of High House Darkness, also known as the Son of Darkness. The man held aloft a black sword trailing smoky chains. 'The Knight is in Darujhistan?' he asked, fighting a shiver of fear.

'In Darujhistan,' K'rul replied. 'Around Darujhistan. Above Darujhistan. His presence is a lodestone to power, and great is the danger.' The Elder God faced Kruppe. 'He is in league with Master Baruk and the T'orrud Cabal – Darujhistan's secret rulers have found a two-edged ally. Dragnipur tasted a demon's soul this night, Kruppe, in your city. It is never thirsty for long, and it will feed on more blood before this is done.'

'Can anyone withstand it?' Kruppe asked.

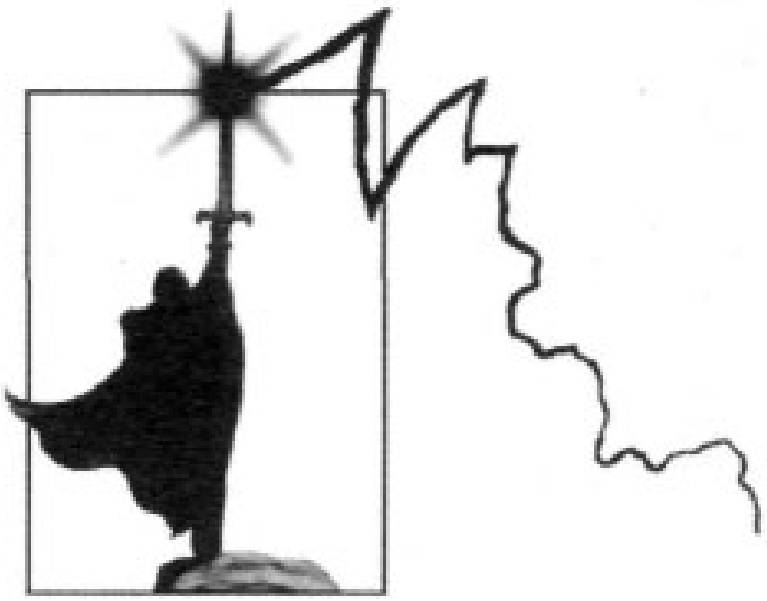
K'rul shrugged. 'None could when it was first forged, but that was long ago, before even my time. I cannot answer for the present. I have one other piece of information, Kruppe, a small piece, I'm afraid.'

'Kruppe hearkens.'

'The journey Master Baruk is sending you on to the Gadrobi Hills. Elder magic brews anew, after so long. It is Tellann – of the Imass – but what it touches is Omtose Phellack – Jaghut Elder magic. Kruppe, stay out of their way. Especially guard the Coin Bearer. What is about to come is a danger as grave as the Knight and his sword, and as ancient. Step carefully, Kruppe.'

'Kruppe always steps carefully, Eldering One.'

BOOK FIVE



THE GADROBI HILLS

Beyond these thin hide walls
a child sits, before her on worn silk
a Deck is arrayed.
She cannot yet speak
and the scenes before her
she's never before seen in this life.
The child gazes upon a lone card
named Obelisk, the stone grey
she can feel its roughness in her mind.
Obelisk stands buried in a grassy knoll
like a knuckle protruded
from the earth, past and future.
This child's eyes are wide
with terror, for cracks have appeared
in the stone of stones and she knows
the shattering is begun.

Silverfox
Outrider Hurlochel,
6th Army

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I saw them on the shores
the deepening pits of their gaze
vowed immortal war
against the sighing calm
of Jaghut seas ...

Gothos' Folly Gothos (b.?)

907th Year in the Third Millennium
The Season of Fanderay in the Year of the Five Tusks
By Malazan reckoning, 1163rd Year of Burn's Sleep
T'lan Imass reckoning, The Year of Gathering, Tellann Arise

As the days passed, Adjunct Lorn felt a sharpness return to her mind, the exhaustion and depression fading away. The thought that she could allow herself to slip into carelessness so easily had left her shaken, and that was not a feeling with which she was familiar. She did not know how to deal with it, and this kept her unbalanced, not quite sure of her own efficacy.

As the Gadrobi Hills appeared, first to the south and then to the west as well, she sensed a desperate urgency to regain her confidence. The mission approached a vital juncture. Success with the Jaghut barrow would almost ensure success with everything else.

Since this dawn she'd ridden hard, pushing to keep her schedule intact after travelling so slowly in the first few days. Both horses were in need of rest, so she now walked ahead of them, the reins tucked through her belt. And beside her walked Tool.

Though the Imass spoke often, at her prodding, of many fascinating things, he denied her efforts regarding matters important to the Empire, and to Laseen's continued power. All seemed to return to the vows he had taken

at the last Gathering. For the Imass, something was coming to a head. She wondered if it was somehow connected with freeing this Jaghut Tyrant. And that was a disturbing thought.

Still, she would not permit any ambivalence to threaten the mission. In this she was Laseen's arm, and it was directed not of Lorn's own accord but by the Empress. Dujek and Tayschrenn had well reminded her of that truth. Thus, she played no role in all this – not as the woman named Lorn. How could she be held responsible for anything?

'In my years among humans,' Tool said, beside her, 'I have come to recollect the passing of emotions in body and expressions. Adjunct, you have worn a frown the past two days. Is this significant?'

'No,' she snapped. 'It isn't.' Purging her thoughts of personal feelings had never been so difficult as it was now – was this a lasting effect of Oponn's meddling? Perhaps Tool could rid her of it. 'Tool,' she said, 'what is significant, as you put it, is that I don't know enough about what we're doing. We are seeking a standing stone, the barrow's marker. Well, assuming it can be found, why was it not so long ago? Why could not three thousand years of hunting find this barrow?'

'We will find the standing stone,' Tool replied calmly. 'It marks the barrow in truth, but the barrow is not there.'

The Adjunct scowled. *More riddles.* 'Explain.'

The Imass was silent for a minute, then he said, 'I am born of an Elder Warren, Adjunct, known as Tellann. It is more than a source of magic, it is also a time.'

'Are you suggesting that the barrow exists in a different time? Is that how you plan to reach it – by using your Tellann Warren?'

'No, there is no parallel time any different from the one we know. That time is gone, past. It is more a matter of ... flavour. Adjunct, may I continue?'

Lorn's mouth thinned into a straight line.

'The Jaghut who entombed the Tyrant were born of a different Elder Warren. But the term "Elder" is relative only to the existing Warrens of this age. The Jaghut Omtose Phellack is not "Elder" when compared to Tellann. They are the same, of the same *flavour.* Do you understand thus far, Adjunct?'

'Patronizing bastard,' she muttered to herself. 'Yes, Tool.'

The Imass nodded, his bones creaking. 'The barrow has not been found before, precisely because it is Omtose Phellack. It lies within a Warren now lost to the world. Yet, I am Tellann. My Warren touches Omtose Phellack. I can reach it, Adjunct. Any T'lan Imass could. I was chosen because I am without a Clan. I am alone in every way.'

'Why should that be important?' Lorn asked, her stomach twisting.

Tool looked at her. 'Adjunct. What we seek to accomplish is the freeing of a Jaghut Tyrant. Such a being, should it escape our control, or defy our predictions, is capable of destroying this continent. It can enslave all living upon it, and it would do so if permitted. If, instead of me, Logros had selected a Bone Caster; and if the Tyrant was freed, that Bone Caster would become enslaved. A Jaghut Tyrant is dangerous alone. A Jaghut Tyrant with an Imass Bone Caster at its side is unstoppable. They would challenge the gods, and they would kill most of them. Also, I am without a Clan, thus my enslavement – should that event befall – would not enslave blood kin.'

Lorn stared at the Imass. What were the Empress and Tayschrenn thinking of? How could they hope to control this thing? 'You are saying, Tool, that you're expendable.'

'Yes, Adjunct.'

And so, she realized, am I. 'What,' she asked, 'will stop the Tyrant? How do we control it?'

'We don't, Adjunct. That is the gamble we take.'

'And what does that mean?'

Tool shrugged, an audible lifting and dropping of bones beneath the rotted furs. 'The Lord of Moon's Spawn, Adjunct. He will have no choice but to intervene.'

'He's capable of stopping the Tyrant?'

'Yes, Adjunct. He is, although it will cost him dearly, weaken him. More, he is capable of delivering the single punishment that a Jaghut Tyrant fears most.' A faint gleam of light rose in Tool's eye sockets as the Imass stared at Lorn. 'Enslavement, Adjunct.'

Lorn stopped in her tracks. 'You mean the Moon's lord will have the Tyrant working on his side?'

'No, Adjunct. The enslavement is by the lord's hand, but it is beyond him as well. You see, the Empress knows who the lord is, and what he possesses.'

Lorn nodded. 'He's Tiste Andii, and a High Mage.'

A rasp of laughter came from Tool. 'Adjunct, he is Anomander Rake, the Son of Darkness. Bearer of Dragnipur.'

Lorn frowned.

Tool seemed to have noticed her confusion, for the Imass elaborated. 'Dragnipur is a sword, born of the Age before Light. And Darkness, Adjunct, is the Goddess of the Tiste Andii.'

A few minutes later, Lorn found her voice. 'The Empress,' she said quietly, 'knows how to pick her enemies.'

And then Tool hit her with another stunning revelation. 'I am sure,' the Imass said, 'the Tiste Andii regret their coming to this world.'

'They *came* to this world? From where? How? Why?'

'The Tiste Andii were of Kurald Galain, the Warren of Darkness. Kurald Galain stood alone, untouched. The Goddess, their mother, knew loneliness ...' Tool hesitated. 'There is probably little truth in this story, Adjunct.'

'Go on,' Lorn said quietly. 'Please.'

'In her loneliness, the Goddess sought something outside herself. Thus was born Light. Her children the Tiste Andii saw this as a betrayal. They rejected her. Some hold they were cast out, others that they departed their mother's embrace by choice. While Tiste Andii mages still use the Warren of Kurald Galain they are no longer *of* it. And some have embraced another Warren, that of Starvald Demelain.'

'The First Warren.'

Tool nodded.

'Whose Warren did Starvald Demelain belong to?'

'It was the home of Dragons, Adjunct.'

Murillio turned in his saddle and brought the mule to a halt on the dusty road. He glanced ahead. Kruppe and Crokus had already reached the Worry Crossroads. He patted his brow with the soft satin of his burnous, then looked back again. Coll leaned hunched over in his saddle, losing the rest of his breakfast.

Murillio sighed. It was a wonder to see the man sober, but that he'd insisted on accompanying them bordered on miraculous. Murillio wondered if Coll suspected anything of Rallick's plans – but no, he would've brought a fist down on his and Rallick's head in short order if he'd so much as caught a hint of what they were doing.

It had been Coil's pride that had got him into his present mess, and drink did nothing to diminish it. To the contrary, in fact. Coll had even donned his brigandine armour, replete with arm and leg greaves. A bastard sword hung at the large man's hip and, with his mail coif and helmet, he looked every inch a noble knight. The only exception was the green tinge to his rounded face. He was also the only one of them to have found a horse instead of these damned mules Kruppe had scrounged.

Coll straightened in his saddle and smiled wanly at Murillio, then spurred his horse alongside. They resumed the journey without a word, nudging their mounts into a canter until they'd caught up with the others.

As usual, Kruppe was pontificating. 'No more than a handful of days, assures Kruppe, wizened traveller of the wastes beyond glittering Darujhistan. No reason to be so glum, lad. Consider this a mighty adventure.'

Crokus looked to Murillio and threw up his hands. 'Adventure? I don't even know what we're doing out here! Won't anybody tell me anything? I can't believe I agreed to this!'

Murillio grinned at the boy. 'Come now, Crokus. How many times have you expressed curiosity about our constant travels outside the city? Well, here we are – all your questions are about to find answers.'

Crokus hunched down in his saddle. 'You told me you all worked as agents for some merchant. What merchant? I don't see any merchant. And where's our horses? How come Coil's the only one with a horse? How come nobody gave me a sword or something? Why—?'

'All right!' Murillio laughed, holding up a hand. 'Enough, please! We *are* agents for a merchant,' he explained. 'But it's rather unusual merchandise we're acquiring.'

'A rather unusual merchant as well, Kruppe adds with a warm smile. Lad, we are agents seeking information on behalf of our employer, who is none other than High Alchemist Baruk!'

Crokus stared at Kruppe. 'Baruk! And he can't afford to give us horses?'

Kruppe cleared his throat. 'Ah, yes. Well. There was something of a misunderstanding between worthy, honest Kruppe and a conniving, deceitful stabler. None the less, Kruppe received full recompense, thus saving our kind master eleven silver coins.'

'Which he'll never see,' Murillio muttered.

Kruppe went on, 'As for a sword, lad, what on earth for? Ignore blustery, pallid Coll there, with all his sweaty trappings of war. A mere affectation of his. And Murillio's rapier is no more than an ornamental trifle, though no doubt he would claim that the jewels and emeralds studding said item's hilt are towards achieving fine balance or some such martial detail.' Kruppe

smiled beatifically at Murillio. 'Nay, lad, the true masters at acquiring information need no such clumsy pieces of metal; indeed, we disdain them.'

'OK,' Crokus grumbled, 'what kind of information are we looking for, then?'

'All that yon ravens overhead can see,' Kruppe said, waving a hand in the air. 'Other travellers, other efforts within the Gadrobi Hills, all grist for Master Baruk's mill of news. We observe without being observed. We learn while remaining a mystery to all. We ascend to the—'

'Will you shut up?' Coll moaned. 'Who brought the water-skins?'

Smiling, Murillio removed a clay jug webbed in twine from his saddlehorn and handed it to Coll.

'A sponge,' Kruppe said, 'squeezed beneath the burden of armour. See the man down our precious water, see it immediately reappear salty and grimy on his weathered skin. What yon poisons have leaked forth? Kruppe shudders at the thought.'

Coll ignored him, handing the jug to Crokus. 'Buck up, lad,' he said. 'You're getting paid, and damn well. With luck there'll be no trouble. Believe me, in this kind of work, excitement is the last thing we're looking for. Still,' he glared at Murillio, 'I'd feel a whole lot better if Rallick were with us.'

Crokus bristled. 'And I'm an unworthy stand-in, right? You think I don't know that, Coll? You think—?'

'Don't tell me what I think,' Coll rumbled. 'I never said you were a stand-in, Crokus. You're a thief, and those kinds of skill come in a lot handier than anything I could manage. The same for Murillio. And as for Kruppe, well, his talents extend no further than his stomach and whatever he wants jammed in it. You and Rallick share a lot more than you think, and that's why you're the most qualified man here.'

'Barring the necessary brains, of course,' Kruppe said, 'which is my true skill – though one such as Coll would never understand such abilities, alien as they are to him.'

Coll leaned towards Crokus. 'You're wondering why I'm wearing all this armour,' he whispered loudly. 'It's because Kruppe's in charge. When Kruppe's in charge I don't feel safe unless I'm prepared for war. If it comes to that, lad, I'll get us out alive.' He leaned back and stared straight ahead. 'I've done it before. Right, Kruppe?'

'Absurd accusations.' Kruppe sniffed.

'So,' Crokus said, 'what are we supposed to be on the lookout for?'

'We'll know it when we see it,' Murillio said. He nodded towards the hills rising to the east. 'Up there.'

Crokus was silent for a time, then his eyes narrowed. 'The Gadrobi Hills, Are we looking for a rumour, Murillio?'

Murillio stiffened, but it was Kruppe who replied, 'Indeed, lad. Rumours upon rumours. I applaud your cunning conclusion. Now, where is that water jug? Kruppe's thirst has become intense.'

Sorry's departure through Jammit's Gate was casual, unhurried. Tracking the Coin Bearer was simple, and did not require that the boy remain within her range of vision. She sensed Crokus and Kruppe, in the company of two others, on the road a league beyond Worrytown. They did not seem to be in any kind of rush.

Whatever mission they were on, that it concerned the welfare of Darujhistan was plain. Thinking on it, Sorry was sure that the men within that group were spies and, in all likelihood, able ones. The dandy, Murillio, could move through noble-born circles with an ease coupled with a desirable coyness – the perfect combination for a spy. Rallick, though he did not accompany them on this mission, was the eyes and ears within the Assassins' Guild, thus covering another power base. Kruppe's world was that of the thieves and lower classes, whence rumours sprang to life like weeds in muddy soil. The third man was clearly a military man, no doubt serving as the group's sword arm.

On a mundane level, then, an adequate group to protect the Coin Bearer, though insufficient to prevent her killing him — especially with the assassin left behind.

Yet something nagged within Sorry's mind, a vague suspicion that the group was heading into danger – a danger that threatened her as well. Once beyond Worrytown she picked up her pace. As soon as she found herself alone on the road, she opened her Warren of Shadow and slipped into its swift tracks.

The Adjunct could find nothing to set apart the hill they approached. Its grass-cloaked summit was dwarfed by those around it. A half dozen scraggly, wind-twisted scrub oaks climbed one side amid a scree of broken boulders. The summit flattened out into a rough circle, rock pushing through here and there.

Overhead wheeled ravens, so high as to be no more than specks against the muggy grey sky. Lorn watched Tool striding ahead of her, the Imass choosing an unwavering path towards the hill's base. She slumped in her saddle, feeling defeated by the world around her. The midday heat sapped her strength, and the sluggishness reached through to her thoughts – not Oponn's doing, she knew. This was the pervasive dread clinging to the air, the sense that what they were doing was wrong, terribly wrong.

To fling this Jaghut Tyrant into the hands of the Empire's enemy, to trust this Tiste Andii Anomander Rake to destroy it, yet at great cost to himself – thus opening the way for Malazan sorceries in turn to kill the Son of Darkness – now seemed precipitous, absurd in its ambitions.

Tool came to the base of the hill and waited for the Adjunct to arrive. Lorn saw, at Tool's hide-wrapped feet, a grey rock jutting perhaps ten inches from the. earth.

'Adjunct,' the Imass said, 'this is the barrow marker we seek.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'There's hardly any soil cover here at all,' she said. 'Are you suggesting this standing stone has eroded down to its present size?'

'The stone has not eroded,' Tool answered. 'It has stood here since before the sheets of ice came to cover this land. It stood here when the Rhivi Plain was an inland sea, long before the waters withdrew to what is now Lake Azur. Adjunct, the stone is in fact taller than both of us combined, and what you think to be bedrock is shale.'

Lorn was surprised at the hint of anger in Tool's voice. She dismounted and set to hobbling the horses. 'How long do we stay here, then?'

'Until this evening passes. With tomorrow's dawn I will open the way, Adjunct.'

Faintly from above came the cries of ravens. Lorn lifted her head and gazed at the specks wheeling high over them. They'd been with them for days. Was that unusual? She didn't know. Shrugging, she unsaddled the horses.

The Imass remained motionless, his gaze seeming fixed on the stone marker.

Lorn went about preparing her camp. Among the scrub oaks she found wood for a small cooking fire. It was dry, weathered and likely to yield little smoke. Though she did not anticipate company, caution had become her habit. Before dusk arrived she found a nearby hill higher than those around it, and ascended to its summit. From this position she commanded a view that encompassed leagues on all sides. The hills continued their roll southward, sinking to steppes to the southeast. Due east of them stretched Catlin Plain, empty of life as far as she could see.

Lorn turned to the north. The forest they had travelled round a few days ago was still visible, a dark line thickening as it swept westward to the Tahlyn Mountains. She sat down and waited for night to fall. It was then that she'd be able to spot any campfires.

Even as night fell, the heat remained oppressive. Lorn walked around the hill's summit to stretch her legs. She found evidence of past excavations, scars that dug into the shale. And evidence of the Gadrobi herders remained, from as far back as when they fashioned stone tools. Against the south side of the hill the ground had been carved out, not in search of a

barrow but as a stone quarry. It appeared that beneath the shale was flint, chocolate brown, sharp-edged and crusted in white chalk.

Curious, Lorn investigated further, scrambling down into the cavity. Stone flakes carpeted the pit's base. She crouched and picked up a piece of flint. It was the tip of a spear point, expertly shaped.

The echo of this technology was found in Tool's chalcedony sword. She needed no further proof of the Imass's assertions. Humans had indeed come from them, had indeed inherited a world.

Empire was a part of them, a legacy flowing like blood through human muscle, bone and brain. But such a thing could easily be seen as a curse. Were they destined one day to become human versions of the T'lan Imass? Was war all there was? Would they bow to it in immortal servitude, no more than deliverers of death?

Lorn sat down in the quarry and leaned against the chiselled, weathered stone. The Imass had conducted a war of extermination lasting hundreds of thousands of years. Who or what had the Jaghut been? According to Tool, they'd abandoned the concept of government, and turned their backs on empires, on armies, on the cycles of rise and fall, fire and rebirth. They'd walked alone, disdainful of their own kind, dismissive of community, of purposes greater than themselves.

They would not, she realized, have started a war.

'Oh, Laseen,' she murmured, tears welling in her eyes, 'I know why we fear this Jaghut Tyrant. Because he became human, he became like us, he enslaved, he destroyed, and he did it better than we could.' She lowered her head into her hands. 'That's why we fear.'

She fell silent then, letting the tears roll down her cheeks, seep between her fingers, trickle along her wrists. Who wept from her eyes? she wondered. Was it Lorn, or Laseen? Or was it for our kind? What did it matter? Such tears had been shed before, and would be again – by others like her and yet unlike her. And the winds would dry them all.

Captain Paran glanced at his companion. 'You've got a theory about all this?' he asked.

Toc the Younger scratched his scar. 'Damned if I know, Captain.' He stared down at the black, burned, crusted raven lying on the ground in front of them. 'I've been counting, though. That's the eleventh roasted bird in the last three hours. And, unless they're covering the Rhivi Plain like some bloody carpet, it seems we're on somebody's trail.'

Paran grunted, then kicked his horse forward.

Toc followed. 'And it's a nasty somebody,' he continued. 'Those ravens look like they was blasted from the inside out. Hell, even the flies avoid them.'

'In other words,' Paran grated, 'sorcery.'

Toc squinted at the hills south of them. They'd found a woodcutter's trail through the Tahlyn Forest, shaving days off their journey. As soon as they'd returned to the Rhivi traders' track, however, they'd found the ravens, and also the signs of two horses and one moccasined man on foot. This latter group of tracks was only a few days old.

'Can't understand why the Adjunct and that Imass are moving so slowly,' Toc muttered, repeating words he'd uttered a dozen times since the day's beginning. 'You think she doesn't know something's trailing her?'

'She's an arrogant woman,' Paran said, his free hand gripping his sword. 'And with that Imass with her, why should she worry?'

'Power draws power,' Toc said, scratching again at his scar. The motion triggered yet another flash of light in his head, but it was changing. At times he thought he could almost see images, scenes within the light. 'Damn Seven Cities' superstitions, anyway,' he growled, under his breath.

Paran looked at him oddly. 'You say something?'

'No.' Toc hunched down in his saddle. The captain had been pushing them hard. His obsession was running them down; even with the extra mount, the horses were near finished. And a thought nagged Toc. What would happen

when they caught up with the Adjunct? Obviously, Paran intended to catch Lorn and the Imass, spurred by vengeance that overwhelmed his previous intentions. With Lorn dead or her plans awry, Paran's command would be safe. He could join Whiskeyjack and the squad at leisure. Assuming they still lived, of course.

Toc could think of a thousand flaws in the Captain's plans. First and foremost was the T'lan Imass. Was Paran's sword its match? In the past, sorcery had been flung at the Imass warriors with a frenzy born of desperation. Nothing had worked. The only way to destroy an Imass was to chop it to pieces. Toc didn't think the captain's weapon, god-touched as it was, could do the job, but there was no convincing Paran of anything these days.

They came upon another raven, its feathers fluttering in the wind, its entrails swollen by the sun and bright red like cherries. Toc rubbed his scar again, and almost fell from the saddle as an image, clear and precise, burgeoned in his head. He saw a small shape, moving so fast as to be but a blur. Horses screamed, and a massive tear opened up in the air. He jolted, as if something large and heavy had struck him, and the tear yawned, swirling darkness beyond. Toc heard his own horse scream. Then it was gone, and he found himself gripping the hinged horn of his saddle with all his strength.

Paran rode ahead, apparently noticing nothing, his back straight and his gaze fixed southward. One hand played lightly on the sword's pommel.

Toc shook himself, leaned to one side and spat. What had he just seen? That tear – how could the air itself be torn like that? The answer came to him. A *Warren, an opening Warren could do that.* He spurred his horse alongside Paran's.

'Captain, we're heading into an ambush.'

Paran's head snapped around. His eyes glittered. 'Then prepare yourself.'

Toc opened his mouth to protest, but he shut it without speaking. What was the use? He strung his bow and loosened the scimitar in its scabbard, then set an arrow against the bowstring. He glanced over at Paran, who had

unsheathed his sword and laid it across his thighs. 'It'll come by Warren, Captain.'

Paran found no need to question Toe's certitude. He almost looked eager.

Toc studied the sword, Chance. The dull, hazy light played along the polished blade like water. Somehow it, too, looked eager to Toe's eye.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

'Tis bloody stirrups when the Jaghut
ride their souls, a thund'rous charge
without surcease,
the hard knots within thud
drumming fierce the flow of ice
a certain promise ...
'tis the Jaghut warring the dusk
on a field of broken stones ...

Jaghut
Fisher (b.?)

Quick Ben sat in the hut, his back to the ancient stone tier Wall. Before him rose the five sticks that linked him with Hairlock. The string connecting the sticks was taut. Across from the wizard, near the hide-covered entrance, sat Trotts.

Kalam had still not recovered enough to accompany Quick Ben, or to guard him as Trotts now did. The wizard had known the Barghast warrior for years, he'd fought alongside him in more battles than he cared to recall, and more than once one of them had saved the other's skin. And yet Quick Ben realized he really knew very little about Trotts. The one thing he did know, however, comforted him. The Barghast was a savage, brutal fighter, as capable with his throwing axes as he was with the longsword he now cradled in his lap. And he was fearless in the face of sorcery, secure in the fetishes tied into his braids, and in the woad tattoos inscribed by the hand of his clan's shaman.

Considering what might fall into their laps, those protections could come in handy.

The Barghast stared at the wizard with flat, expressionless eyes, unwavering in the dim light.

Quick Ben shook out the kinks in his hands, then bent forward to study the array of tied sticks. 'Hairlock's crouching inside his Warren,' he said. 'Not moving. Seems to be waiting.' He sat back and withdrew his dagger, which he jammed point first into the packed earth. 'So we wait, too. And watch.'

Trotts asked, 'Watch what?'

'Never mind.' Quick Ben sighed. 'You have that scrap of bedroll?'

Trotts removed from a sleeve a torn piece of cloth. He came forward, giving the sticks more room than was necessary, and pushed the scrap into the wizard's hand.

Quick Ben set it down on his left. He muttered a few words and passed his hand over it. 'Resume your seat,' he said. 'And keep your weapon ready in case things go bad.'

He closed his eyes then, reaching into his Warren. Before him an image formed that made him jerk with surprise. 'What,' he whispered, 'is Hairlock doing on Rhivi Plain?'

Paran could feel nothing but the white fire of vengeance, filling his mind, coruscating through his body. Oponn had chosen to use him. Now he would use Oponn, the Twins' power, that horrifying edge of destruction that came with Ascendancy. And like the gods, he could be cold-blooded in that use, even if it meant pulling Oponn kicking and screaming on to this plain to face whatever lay ahead.

A hiss of warning that might have been his conscience reached through to him. Toc the Younger was his friend, perhaps the only friend he had. Unprotected by any god, his chance of surviving what was coming was slim. Would there be another death to lay at his feet? Paran pushed aside the possibility. He was here to answer for Tattersail's murder. The Adjunct had

taught him the value of being singleminded. *But what did Tattersail teach you?*

'If things get too hot,' he said, 'pull out, Toc. Ride for Darujhistan. Find Whiskeyjack.'

The scout nodded.

'If I go down—'

'I heard you, Captain.'

'Good.'

Silence fell between them, the only sounds remaining the thump of hoofs and the hot west wind that blew like sand whispering across stone.

Vague anticipations crowded Paran's head. Was the Adjunct waiting for them? If she recognized him and Toe, she'd have no reason to attack them. For all she knew, the captain had been killed. And Toc was a Claw. There'd be no ambush. The Adjunct would simply step out into the open and hail him, no doubt shocked by his appearance but hardly suspicious.

And when she came close, Chance would sing. It would be done, and if necessary they'd deal with the Imass afterwards. He hoped that the Imass would simply leave with the mission's collapse. Without the Adjunct, everything would fall through.

At least, so he hoped. Chance might be a gifted sword, but the T'lan Imass were Elder creations, born of sorceries that made Oponn less than a child.

Paran's grip on the sword's handle was tight. His hand ached, and he could feel sweat between his fingers. Chance felt no different from any other weapon. Should he be expecting something more? He couldn't recall much of the time he'd last used it, against the Hound. But if there was power in the weapon, should he not be able to sense it? As it was, Chance felt cold, as if he clutched a shard of ice that refused to melt in his grip. If anything, Chance felt awkward, as if he was a novice and held it wrongly.

What had triggered this sudden crumpling of confidence? *Pulling an* Ascendant *into the fray ... how precisely do I do that? Of course, if Oponn's*

as eager as last time ... Maybe it was no more than just the tension that came with waiting for something to happen. Was Toc mistaken? He turned to the man beside him and opened his mouth to speak.

A loud, manic cackle stopped him. Paran pulled savagely on the reins. His horse screamed and reared. The air seemed to rip and a cold wind gusted against them. The captain raised his sword and cursed. The horse screamed again, this time in pain. It crumpled beneath him, as if its bones had been turned to dust. Paran sprawled, the sword flying from his hand as the ground rose up to meet him. The horse's fall had the sound of a bag filled with rocks and lamp oil, landing beside him and rolling over his legs.

Toc's bowstring twanged and an arrow shattered against something hard.

Paran pushed himself on to his side and looked up.

The puppet Hairlock floated above the ground twenty feet ahead. A second arrow struck as the captain watched, also shattering.

Hairlock laughed again, swinging his mad stare to Toc. He gestured.

Paran cried out, twisting to see Toc thrown from his mount. The Claw cartwheeled through the air. A jagged tear opened in the air in front of him. Paran shouted a second time in helpless honor as Toc the Younger plunged into that tear and disappeared into swirling mists. The rent closed with a snap, leaving no sign of Paran's companion.

Hairlock descended slowly to the ground. The puppet paused to adjust his tattered clothing, then strode towards Paran.

'I thought it might be you,' Hairlock sniggered. 'Isn't vengeance sweeter than honey, eh, Captain? Your death will be long, protracted and very, very painful. Imagine my pleasure at seeing you like this!'

Paran pushed with his legs. The horse's body fell back, freeing him. He scrambled to his feet and dived for his sword, grasping it while rolling, then regained his feet.

Hairlock watched in evident amusement and began to advance. 'That weapon is not for me, Captain. It'll not even cut me. So,' the puppet came

on, 'wail away.'

Paran raised the weapon, a wave of despair coming over him.

Hairlock stopped and cocked his head. He whirled to face the north.

'Impossible!' the puppet snarled.

Now Paran caught what Hairlock had already heard: the howling of Hounds.

In the hut Quick Ben had watched the ambush, dumbfounded. What was Paran doing? Where was Tattersail? 'Hood's Path,' he'd whispered angrily, 'talk about losing track!' In any case, it had all happened too fast for him to prevent the loss of the one-eyed man accompanying the captain.

His eyes flew open and he snatched the scrap of cloth. 'Sorry,' he hissed. 'Sorry! Hear me, woman! I know you. I know who you are. Cotillion, Patron of Assassins, the Rope, I call upon you!'

He felt a presence enter his mind, followed by a man's voice. 'Well done, Quick Ben.'

The wizard said, 'I have a message for you, Rope. For Shadowthrone.' He felt a heightened tension in his head. 'A deal's been struck. Your lord's Hounds hunger for vengeance. I haven't time to explain it all now – leave that to Shadowthrone. I am about to give to you the location of the one Shadowthrone seeks.'

He heard wry amusement in the Rope's voice. 'I provide the link, correct? The means by which you stay alive in all this. I congratulate you, Quick Ben. Few mortals have ever succeeded in avoiding my lord's inclination to double-cross. It seems you have outwitted him. Very well, convey to me this location. Shadowthrone will receive it immediately.'

Quick Ben cast forth Hairlock's precise position on the Rhivi Plain. He only hoped the Hounds would arrive in time. He had a lot of questions for Paran, and wanted the captain to reach them alive but he had to admit that the chances of that were slight.

All that remained for the wizard now was to prevent the puppet's escape. He smiled again. That was something he looked forward to.

Onos T'oolan had squatted before the standing stone since dawn. In the hours since, Lorn had wandered the nearby hills, at war with herself. She now knew with a certainty that what they were doing was wrong, that its consequences went far beyond the petty efforts of a mundane Empire.

The T'lan Imass worked in the span of millennia, their purposes their own. Yet their endless war had become her endless war. Laseen's Empire was a shadow of the First Empire. The difference lay in that the Imass conducted genocide against another species. Malaz killed its own. Humanity had not climbed up since the dark age of the Imass: it had spiralled down.

The sun stood high overhead. She had last looked upon Tool an hour past. The warrior had not moved an inch. Lorn climbed yet another hill, already a quarter-mile distant from the standing stone. She hoped to catch a glimpse of Lake Azur, to the west.

She came to the hill's summit and found herself not thirty feet from four mounted travellers. It was hard to determine who was more surprised, but the Adjunct moved first, her sword rasping into her hands as she sprang to close the distance.

Two were essentially unarmed, a boy and a short fat man. They and one other, a gaudily dressed man now unsheathing a duelling rapier, rode mules. But it was the last man who held Lorn's attention. Fully armoured astride a horse, he was the first to react to her charge. Bellowing, he spurred his mount past the others and unsheathed a bastard sword.

Lorn smiled as the fat man attempted to open a Warren and failed. Her Otataral blade steamed briefly before a cold wash of air poured from it. The fat man, his eyes widening, reeled back in his saddle and promptly rolled over the mule's rump, landing heavily in the dust. The boy leaped down from his own mount and paused, unsure whether to aid the fat man or remove the dagger from his belt. As the armoured man rode past him, he

reached his decision and ran to where the fat man had fallen. The one with the rapier had also dismounted and approached in the warrior's wake.

Lorn's eyes caught all this between blinks. Then the warrior was upon her, swinging his bastard sword one-handed down towards her head.

The Adjunct didn't bother to parry. Instead, she dodged in front of the horse to come up on the man from his left, away from his sword arm. The horse reared. Lorn darted past, slicing her blade across the man's thigh, above the plate armour. The Otataral edge sliced through chain links, leather and flesh with equal ease.

The warrior grunted and clapped a mailed hand to the spurting wound even as the horse threw him from the saddle.

Ignoring him, Lorn engaged the duellist, attempting to beat his thin blade aside and close to bring the edge of her weapon into play. But the man was good, deftly disengaging her attempted beat. The sword's swing unbalanced her before she could slow its momentum preparatory to an upper-cut, and in this moment the duellist extended his rapier.

She cursed as her forward motion brought her on to the blade's tip. The point pushed through the links of her hauberk and entered her left shoulder. Pain lanced like fire up her arm. Angered by the wound, she swung her sword savagely at the man's head. The flat of the blade caught him flush on the forehead and he sprawled back like a limp doll.

Lorn cast a quick glance to where the warrior still struggled to stop the blood gushing from his leg, then whirled to face the last two men. The boy stood before the fat man, who lay unconscious. Though his face was pale, he held a thin-bladed dagger in his left hand and a larger knife in the other. His eyes were hard as he stared at her.

The thought crossed Lorn's mind, belatedly, that she need not have attacked these men. She wore mercenary garb, and the T'lan Imass was not even within sight. Words might have achieved the same results, and she'd never liked shedding blood. Well, it was too late for that now. She advanced slowly.

'We meant no harm,' the boy said in Daru. 'Leave us be.'

Lorn hesitated. The suggestion surprised her. Why not? She straightened. 'Agreed,' she answered in the same language. 'Patch up your friends and steer clear.'

'We'll head back to Darujhistan,' the boy said, looking equally surprised. 'We'll camp here and recover, leave in the morning.'

The Adjunct stepped back. 'Do that, and you'll stay alive. Try anything else, and I'll kill you all. Understood?'

The boy nodded.

Lorn backed away, angling to the north. She'd head that way for a time, then swing round to the east and come back down to where Tool was. She had no idea what had brought these men out into the hills, but didn't suspect it had anything to do with her, or even the barrow. As she increased the distance between herself and the hill, she saw the boy rush over to the warrior. In any case, she concluded, there wasn't much left of that group to cause her worry. The duellist wasn't dead, but he'd awake to a headache. As for the warrior, it was touch and go. She'd seen a lot of blood come from him. The fat man might have broken his neck, and as a mage he was harmless in her vicinity. That left the boy, and since when had she had cause to fear a boy?

Lorn quickened her pace.

After the startling communication from Quick Ben, Sorry had contacted Shadowthrone. The Lord of Shadows had fumed briefly, and after informing the Rope that Ben Adeaphon Delat had been a high priest of Shadow, Sorry found herself sharing Shadowthrone's anger. The man would pay for his many deceits.

Shadowthrone's Hounds had indeed been ready, and she was sure that even now they closed the hunt.

As she resumed her journey through her Warren she met with increasing resistance, a strange pressure with every step she took eastward. Finally, she relented and emerged into the Gadrobi Hills. It was midday, and half a mile ahead rode the Coin Bearer's party. She closed the gap swiftly until she was no more than a hundred yards behind them, gathering shadows about her as she went – though even this proved increasingly difficult. And that could mean only one thing: a T'lan Imass was nearby.

To what, and to whom, was the Coin Bearer riding? Had she miscalculated entirely? Were they agents for the Malazan Empire? That possibility ran contrary to Oponn's influence, but she had trouble arriving at any other conclusion.

This, she told herself, would prove an interesting day.

The party was fifty yards ahead, making their way up a hillside. They reached the summit and disappeared briefly from her view. She quickened her pace, only to hear sounds of fighting on the hilltop – a fight in which Otataral was unveiled.

A flash of rage ran through her. Memory was attached to Otataral, a very personal memory. Cautiously she sought a vantage point at the hill's crest.

The exchange had been short, and the Coin Bearer's party looked near wiped out. In fact, only the Coin Bearer still stood, facing a tall, lithe woman wielding an Otataral blade.

Sorry recognized Adjunct Lorn. On a mission, no doubt, for her dear Empress, a mission that included a T'lan Imass, still out of sight but close. She caught their conversation. If the boy's group weren't agents for the Empire then perhaps their master in Darujhistan had sensed the presence of the Imass out here, and had sent them to investigate.

She would discover the nature of the Adjunct's mission later. Right now, however, it was time to kill the Coin Bearer. And the near proximity of the Imass made success all the more certain. Even Oponn's powers could not overcome the influence of a Tellann Warren. Murdering the boy would be easy. Sorry waited, then smiled as Adjunct Lorn withdrew, heading north.

In minutes, the Coin of Oponn would be in her hands. And this day, a god might die.

As soon as Lorn was sufficiently distant Crokus ran to the warrior. Sorry rose slowly into a crouch, then moved forward in silence, her garotte in her hands.

The Hounds howled again, their eager cries closing in from all sides. Hairlock crouched, indecisive. Then the puppet faced the captain. 'You'll have to wait a little longer to die, Captain. I've no intention of allowing things to be rushed. No, I wish to linger over your demise.'

Chance sweaty in his hands, Paran shrugged. To his own surprise, it made little difference to him. If the Hounds arrived to find Hairlock gone, they'd probably take out their frustration on him, and that would be that. 'You'll come to regret the opportunity, Hairlock. Whether this sword's magic is meant for you or not, I was looking forward to chopping you into kindling. Is your magic a match for my hatred? It would have been nice to find out.'

'Oh, sudden bravery! What do you know of hatred, Captain? When I return I'll show you precisely what hatred can achieve.' The wooden figure gestured and a dozen feet away another tear opened in the air, this one exuding a fetid stench. 'Stubborn mutts,' Hairlock muttered. 'Until later, Captain,' and he scurried for the rent.

In the hut, Quick Ben's grin turned savage. He jerked the dagger free with his right hand and, in a single, fluid motion, sliced the taut strings connecting the sticks.

'Goodbye, Hairlock,' he hissed.

Paran's eyes widened as the puppet flopped on to his stomach. A moment later Hairlock let loose a shriek.

The captain's eyes narrowed. 'Looks like somebody cut your strings, Hairlock,' he said.

The Hounds were close. In moments they'd be all over them.

'Your life, Captain!' Hairlock cried. 'Fling me into the Warren and your life is yours, I swear it!'

Paran leaned on his sword and made no reply.

'Pawn of Oponn,' Hairlock snarled, 'I would spit on you if I could! Spit on your soul!'

The earth rumbled, and at once massive shapes moved around Paran, silently closing in on the immobile marionette. Paran recognized Gear, the Hound he'd wounded. He felt the sword in his hands answer that challenge with an eager tremor that reached into his arms. Gear's head swung in his direction as it passed, and Paran saw a promise in its eyes. The captain smiled. *If anything draws Oponn out, it will be the fight to come.*

Hairlock shrieked one last time, and then the Hounds were upon him.

A large shadow passed across the hill and Paran looked up to see a Great Raven swooping over them. The bird cawed hungrily. 'Too bad,' Paran said to it, 'I doubt its remains would be palatable.'

Three Hounds began fighting over the splintered wood – all that was left of Hairlock. The remaining four, led by Gear, now turned to Paran.

The captain raised his sword and dropped into a combative crouch. 'Come on, then. Through me to the god using me, just once let the tool turn in the Twins' hands. Come on, Hounds, let us soak this ground with blood.'

The creatures fanned out into a half-circle, Gear in the centre.

Paran's smile broadened. *Come to me, Gear. I'm tired of being used and death doesn't seem so frightening any more. Let's be done with it.*

Something heavy pressed down on him, as if a hand had reached down from the sky and tried to drive him into the earth. The Hounds flinched. Paran staggered, unable to breathe, a sudden darkness closing around the

edges of his vision. The ground groaned beneath him, the yellowed grasses of the plain lying flat. Then the pressure lifted and chilled air flooded back into his lungs. Sensing a presence, the captain whirled.

'Step aside,' a tall, black-skinned, white-haired man said, as he pushed past to confront the Hounds. Paran almost dropped his sword. A Tiste Andii?

The man wore a massive two-handed sword strapped to his back. He stood before the Hounds, making no move towards the weapon. All seven had now arrayed themselves before them, but they shifted restlessly, warily eyeing the newcomer.

The Tiste Andii glanced at Paran. 'Whatever you've done to draw the attention of gods, it was unwise,' he said, in Malazan.

'It seems I never learn,' Paran replied.

The Tiste Andii smiled. 'Then we are much alike, mortal.'

Mortal?

The Hounds paced back and forth, growling and snapping the air. The Tiste Andii watched them, then spoke. 'Enough meddling. I see you, Rood,' he said to one Hound, mangy brown, scarred and yellow-eyed. 'Take your kin and leave. Tell Shadowthrone I won't tolerate his interference. My battle with Malaz is my own. Darujhistan is not for him.'

Rood was the only Hound not growling. Its glowing eyes bore steadily into the Tiste Andii's.

'You have heard my warning, Rood.'

Paran watched as the Tiste Andii cocked his head. Slowly he returned his attention to the captain. 'Gear wishes you dead.'

'It's the price I pay for showing mercy.'

The Tiste Andii raised an eyebrow.

Paran shrugged. 'See the scar he carries?'

'That was your mistake, mortal. You must finish what you set out to do.'

'Next time. What happens now?'

'For the moment, mortal, they find the thought of killing me more desirable than that of killing you.'

'And what are their chances?'

'The answer to that is evident in how long they've been hesitating, wouldn't you think, mortal?'

The Hounds attacked faster than anything Paran could have imagined. His heart lurched as a flurry of motion closed in around the other man. As the captain stepped back an invisible fist of darkness exploded behind his eyes, a snapping of massive chains, the groan of huge wooden wheels. He squeezed shut his eyes against the staggering pain, then forced them open again to see that the fight was over. The Tiste Andii had his sword in his hands, its black blade slick with blood – blood that boiled and swiftly became ash. Two Hounds lay un-moving, one to either side of him. A wayward wind drew a wintry breath across the scene with a sound like a gasp, shivering the grasses.

Paran saw that one Hound had been nearly decapitated, while the other had been sliced across its broad chest – it did not look like a killing wound, but the creature's eyes, one blue the other yellow, stared sightlessly skyward.

Rood yelped and the others backed away.

Paran tasted blood in his mouth. He spat, then raised a hand to find blood trickling from his ears. The pain in his head was ebbing. He looked up just as the Tiste Andii's head came round to face him. Seeing death in the man's eyes, Paran stepped back and half raised his sword, though the effort took all his strength. He watched, uncomprehending, as the Tiste Andii shook his head. 'For a moment I thought ... No, I see nothing now ...'

Paran blinked stinging tears from his eyes, then wiped his cheeks. He started on seeing that the stain of those tears on his forearm was pink. 'You just killed two Hounds of Shadow.'

'The others withdrew.'

'Who are you?'

The Tiste Andii did not answer, his attention once more on the Hounds.

Behind them a cloud of shadow was forming in the air, deepening and thickening in its centre. A moment later it dissipated, and a black, shrouded, translucent figure stood in its place, hands tucked into its sleeves. Shadows commanded whatever face lay hidden beneath the hood.

The Tiste Andii lowered his sword's point to the ground. 'They were warned, Shadowthrone. I want one thing understood. You may prove my match here, especially if your Rope is about. But I promise you, it will be messy, and there are those who will avenge me. Your existence, Shadowthrone, could become uncomfortable. Now, I've yet to lose my temper. Withdraw your Realm's influence from the proceedings, and I will leave it at that.'

'I am not involved,' Shadowthrone said quietly. 'My Hounds found the quarry I sought. The hunt is over.' The god's head tilted to observe the two dead creatures. 'Over for all time, for Doan and Ganrod.' Shadowthrone looked up. 'There is no release for them?'

'None. Nor for any who would pursue vengeance.'

A sigh issued from the hooded darkness of the god's face. 'Ah, well. As I said, I am not involved. However, the Rope is.'

'Recall him,' the Tiste Andii commanded. 'Now.'

'He will be severely displeased, Anomander Rake. His plans extend far beyond Darujhistan, seeking to reach the Malazan throne itself.'

Anomander Rake ... Paran recalled Tattersail's convictions after scrying her Deck of Dragons. *The Knight of High House Dark, the Son of Darkness, the lord with the black sword and its deadly chains. Ruler of Moon's Spawn, or so she thought. She saw this coming. This very moment, the clash between Shadow and Dark, the blood spilled ...*

'I fight my own battles,' Rake growled. 'And I'd rather deal with Laseen on the Malazan throne than with a servant of Shadow. Recall him.'

'One last point,' Shadowthrone said, a giggle escaping him, 'I am not responsible for whatever actions the Rope might take against you.'

A smile entered Rake's tone. 'Convince him of the wise course, Shadowthrone. I have no patience for your games. If I am pushed, by either you, your Hounds, or by the Rope, I'll make no distinction. I will assail the Shadow Realm, and you are invited to try to stop me.'

'You lack all subtlety,' the god said, sighing. 'Very well.' He paused and shadows swirled around him. 'He has been recalled. Forcibly extracted, as it were. The field is yours once again, Anomander Rake. The Malazan Empire is all yours, as is Oponn,' Shadowthrone added.

'Oponn?' Rake's head turned slowly, and the captain once again looked into eyes of deep, cold blue. Paran's spirits sank. The Tiste Andii's gaze fell to the sword, then again to Shadowthrone. 'Begone,' Rake said. 'The matter is ended.'

Shadowthrone dipped his head. 'For now.' The god raised his hands and shadows gathered around him. The surviving Hounds closed in, leaving their dead kin where they lay. The shadows thickened, became opaque, entirely hiding those within. When they dispersed, the lord and his Hounds were gone.

Paran eyed the Tiste Andii who now faced him. After a moment the captain shrugged.

Rake's brows rose. 'That's it?' he asked. 'That's the extent of your comments? Do I speak with Oponn directly? I thought I sensed a presence before, but when I looked more carefully ... nothing.' Rake shifted grip on his sword, the point rising. 'Do you hide within, Oponn?'

'Not as far as I'm aware,' Paran replied. 'Apparently Oponn saved my life or, rather, brought me back to life. I've no idea why, but I've been told that I've become Oponn's tool.'

'You are journeying to Darujhistan?'

Paran nodded.

'May I approach?' Rake asked, sheathing his sword.

'Why not?'

The Tiste Andii strode up to him and laid a hand against his chest. Paran felt nothing untoward. Rake stepped back. 'Oponn may have been within you in the past, but it seems the Twins have hastily withdrawn. I see their signs, but no god controls you now, mortal.' He hesitated. 'Their treatment of you was ... unkind. If Caladan Brood was here he could heal that ... You're no longer Oponn's tool.' The Tiste's eyes remained blue, but they'd lightened to the colour of the sky. 'But your sword is.'

There was a squawk nearby and both turned to see a Great Raven alight on one of the Hound's bodies. It plucked out an eye and gobbled it down. Paran fought back a wave of nausea. The huge battered bird hopped towards them.

'This man's sword, Master,' the raven said, 'is not Oponn's only tool, I'm afraid.'

Paran shook his head, his only surprise the realization that nothing surprised him any more. He sheathed his sword.

'Speak on, Crone,' Rake commanded.

The raven cocked its head at Paran. 'Here, Master?'

Rake frowned. 'Perhaps not.' He faced the captain again. 'Hold on to that weapon until your luck turns. When that happens, and if you're still alive, break it or give it to your worst enemy.' A grin crossed his features. 'Thus far, it seems your luck holds.'

Paran hesitated. 'I'm free to go?'

Lord Anomander Rake nodded.

The captain looked around, then strode off in search of the surviving horses.

Minutes later, the shock came to Paran, driving him to his knees. Toc was gone. He'd dragged the man with him in his relentless, mindless pursuit across the plain. He looked up, eyes unseeing. He'd called Hairlock his enemy. He'd proclaimed Lorn's death his final goal. As if these two things would answer the anguish within him, would heal the pain of loss. But *the demon is within me.*

Oponn had been unkind ... What had Rake meant? *Have any of these thoughts been my own? Look at me — my every move seems a desperate search for someone to blame, always someone else. I've made being a tool of a god an excuse, a justification for not thinking, for simply reacting. And others have died for it.*

Rake had also said, 'Finish what you start.' He would have to deal with his own demons later. There could be no turning back. But it had been wrong to think that what he planned would end the pain within him. Adding Lorn's blood to his stained hands would not achieve what he sought.

Paran rose, collected the reins of the surviving horses. He led the beasts back to the scene of the fight. The Tiste Andii had vanished, but the Hounds remained, motionless dark humps in the yellow grass. He dropped the reins and approached one. The slice across its chest still leaked blood. Crouching, Paran reached out, ran his fingers along the animal's hide. *See what the desire for murder gets you? Hood's Breath, but you were a beautiful beast.* His fingertips brushed blood. The captain recoiled at the contact, but it was too late. Something rippled up his arm, swept through him. He fell back into darkness, the sound of chains rattling taut.

Paran found himself walking and he was not alone. Through the gloom he could make out figures on all sides, each shackled with long iron chains, leaning forward as if pulling at an immense weight. The ground underfoot was barren, lifeless. Overhead there was nothing but darkness. Beneath the constant creak of the chains was a heavier sound that Paran could feel through the soles of his boots. Alone unchained, he fell back towards the source of that sound, passing chained figures, many of them not human. A shape appeared, hulking, pitching. A wagon, impossibly huge, its wooden

wheels taller than a man. Driven by an insatiable desire to discover what it carried, Paran moved closer.

A chain ripped across his chest, throwing him from his feet. An ear-piercing howl sounded directly above him. Claws gouged his left arm, pinning it to the ground. A chain rippled under his back. He struggled as a cold wet nose and savage teeth pushed under his chin. The jaws opened, slipped around his neck, then tightened.

Paran lay perfectly still, waiting for the fatal clenching of those jaws. Instead, they pulled away. He found himself staring up into the Hound's eyes, one blue, one brown. A massive collar of iron circled its neck. The beast lunged away. The chain under him snapped taut, flinging Paran into the air. He felt more than heard the wagon groan sideways, even as he landed sprawling into the path of one of the wooden wheels.

A hand grasped the collar of his cloak and dragged him clear. The captain scrambled to his feet.

A voice beside him spoke. 'Any man who has earned mercy from Hounds and walks here unchained is a man worth talking to. Walk with me.'

The shadow of a cowl hid the stranger's features. The man was big, dressed in rags. After releasing Paran he resumed straining on his chain. 'Never before,' he grunted, 'has this prison been so tested.' He hissed as the wagon lurched yet again to the Hounds' frantic attempts to escape. 'I fear this will overturn.'

'And if it does?'

The face swung to him briefly and in the darkness Paran saw the flash of teeth. 'The pulling will get harder.'

'Where are we?'

'The Warren within the Sword. Did not Dragnipur take your life, too?'

'If it had, would I not be chained as well?'

'True enough. What then are you doing here?'

'I don't know,' Paran admitted. 'I saw the Hounds killed by Rake's sword. Then I touched the blood of one of the slain beasts.'

'That explains their confusion. They thought you one of their own ... at first. You were wise to submit to that Hound's challenge.'

'Too frightened to move, you mean.'

The stranger laughed. 'Even so.'

'What is your name?'

'Names are meaningless. Rake killed me. Long ago. That is enough.'

Paran fell silent. *Eternity, chained here, forever pulling. And I ask for the man's name. Would any apology suffice?*

The wagon bucked savagely, earth ripped from under its wheels. Figures fell, wailing. The Hounds howled their fury.

'Gethol's Breath,' the stranger gasped. 'Will they never cease?'

'I don't think they will,' Paran said. 'Can those chains be broken?'

'No. None have managed it yet, that is, and there are dragons among us. But these Hounds ...' He sighed. 'It is astonishing, but already I long for the peace their arrival has shattered.'

'Perhaps I can help.'

The stranger barked a laugh. 'By all means, try.'

Paran moved away, heading towards the Hounds. He had no plan in mind. But *I alone am unchained.* The thought stopped him and he smiled. *Unchained. No one's tool.* He continued on, wondering. He passed figures straining step by step, some silent, some muttering in madness. None raised its head to glance as he passed. The sound of bestial gasping reached him. 'Hounds!' Para called. 'I would help!'

After a time, they appeared from the gloom. Blood sheathed their shoulders and chests, the flesh torn and mangled by the collars. The Hounds trembled, muscles jumping along their flanks. Their eyes, level with Paran's

own, met his with such numbed, helpless misery that his heart lurched. He reached out to the odd-eyed one. 'I would examine your collars, your chains, seeking a flaw.'

The beast walked alongside him – they were ever moving forward, the wagon unceasing in its roll. Paran bent close, running his hands on the collar, seeking a join. There was none. Where the chain attached, the link and the collar seemed of one solid piece. Though he knew little of smithing, he believed this attachment would prove the weakest element and should already show signs of strain. But his fingertips told him otherwise. The iron was not even scratched.

Paran ran his hand along the chain, leaving the Hound's side. He paused noticing the other beast watching his every move, then continued on. From the animal to the wagon, over seventy armspans of length, he ran his hands from link to link, seeking a change in the feel of the iron, seeking heat, gouges. *Nothing*. He arrived alongside the wagon. The wheel he walked behind was solid wood, a span in width, nicked and gouged but otherwise featureless. The wall of the bed was twenty or more feet high. The slatted sideboards of withered, bone-grey wood showed spaces a finger's width between. Paran flinched back on seeing skeletal fingers crowding the cracks, wriggling helplessly.

The wagon's frame beneath the sideboards drew his attention. Here the wood was black, glistening with pitch. Chain-ends entered it, countless in number, sinking seamlessly into the wood. Under his touch the frame seemed solid, yet it was as if the chain links passed through it – whatever held them, then, was beyond the wagon's frame. Paran drew a deep breath of the cool, stale air, then ducked under the bed.

The frame's beam was a dozen spans thick, condensation dripping down from its pitched underside in endless rain. At the inside edge Paran found once again the chains, continuing on further under the wagon. Grasping one, he followed it inward. The links grew colder as did the air around him. Before long he was forced to release the chain, his hands burned by the cold. The rain from the underside of the wagon came down as slivers of ice. Two paces ahead, the chains converged, swallowed by a suspended pool of

absolute darkness. Cold poured from it in pulsing waves. Paran could get no closer.

He hissed in frustration as he scrambled along opposite the dark hole, wondering what to do next. Even if he managed to break a chain, he had no idea which ones belonged to the Hounds. As for the others ... Anomander Rake seemed a creature of clear – if cold – justice. To break a chain could unleash ancient horrors upon the realms of the living. Even the stranger he'd spoken with could once have been a Tyrant, a horrible dominator.

Paran unsheathed Chance. As the blade leaped free of the scabbard it bucked wildly in his hands. The captain grinned even as tremors of terror reached through his hands from the sword. 'Oponn! Dear Twins, I call on you! *Now!'*

The air groaned. Paran stumbled over someone, who loosed a stream of curses. Sheathing his sword, he reached down, hand closing on brocaded cloth. He pulled the god to his feet. 'Why you?' Paran demanded. 'I wanted your sister.'

'Madness, mortal!' the male Twin snapped. 'To call me here! So close to the Queen of Darkness – *here, within a god-slaying sword!'*

Paran shook him. Filled with a mindless, bestial rage, the captain *shook* the god. He heard the Hounds howl, and fought back a sudden desire to join his voice to their cries.

The Twin, terror in his bright eyes, clawed at Paran. 'What – what are you doing?'

Paran stopped, his attention drawn to two chains that had gone slack. 'They're coming.'

The wagon seemed to leap upward, rocked as it had never been before. The thunder of the impact filled the air, wood and ice cascading down.

'They have your scent, Twin.'

The god shrieked, battered his fists into Paran's face, scratching, kicking, but the captain held on. 'Not the luck that pulls.' He spat blood. 'The luck ...

that pushes—'

The wagon was hammered again, its wheels bucking into the air to come down with a splintering, echoing concussion. Paran had no time to wonder at the savage strength that coursed through him, a strength sufficient to hold down a god gripped in panic. He simply held on.

'Please!' the Twin begged. 'Anything! Just ask it! Anything within my powers.'

'The Hounds' chains,' Paran said. 'Break them.'

'I – I cannot!'

The wagon shuddered sickeningly, distant wood splintering. Paran dragged the Twin a pace as it rolled forward again. 'Think of a way,' he said. 'Or the Hounds will have you.'

'I – I cannot be sure, Paran.'

'What? You can't be sure of what?'

The Twin gestured towards the blackness. 'In there. The chains are held in place within it – within the Warren of Darkness, within Kurald Galain. Should they enter ... I do not know – I cannot be certain, but the chains may disappear.'

'How can they enter?'

'They could be leaving one nightmare only to enter another.'

'It cannot be worse, Twin. I asked you, how?'

'Bait.'

'What?'

The Twin smiled shakily. 'As you said, they're coming. But, Paran, you must release me. By all means, hold me before the portal, but please, at the last moment ...'

'I release my hold on you.'

The god nodded.

'Very well.'

The Hounds struck the wagon again, and this time they broke through. Clutching the Twin, Paran spun round to see the beasts charging out of the gloom. His captive shrieked.

The Hounds leaped.

Paran released the god, dropping flat to the ground as the Hounds passed through the air above. The Twin vanished. The Hounds flashed past, disappeared into the portal in silence, and were gone.

Paran rolled to his feet, even as darkness reached out for him, not with the cold of oblivion but with a breath like warm, sighing wind.

He opened his eyes to find himself on his hands and knees on the plain's yellowed grass, beside a flattened, blood-smeared patch where the body of a Hound had once lain. Insects buzzed close by. His head aching, Paran climbed to his feet. The other Hound's body was gone as well. What had he done? And why? Of all the things that the Twin could have offered him ... *Tattersail ... Toc the Younger...* Then again, to pluck a soul back through Hood's Gate was not likely within Oponn's power to achieve. Had he freed the Hounds? He realized he would probably never know.

He staggered over to the horses. At least, for a short time there, he had been unchained. He had been free, and what he had done he had done by his own choice. My *own choice*.

He looked to the south. *Darujhistan and the Adjunct await me. Finish what you started, Paran. Finish it once and for all.*

'Damn inconvenient,' Coll growled as Crokus completed tying the bandage. 'She was good,' he added. 'She knew exactly what to do. I'd say she'd been trained. Sort of fits, since she was dressed like a mercenary.'

'I still don't understand,' Crokus said, sitting back on his haunches. He glanced at Murillio and Kruppe. Both remained unconscious. 'Why did she

attack us? And why didn't she kill me?'

Coll did not reply. He sat glaring at his horse, which stood a dozen feet away, quietly cropping grass. He'd already voiced a dozen foul curses at the beast, and Crokus suspected that their relationship had been, as Kruppe would put it, irretrievably compromised.

'What's this?' Coll grunted.

Crokus realized that the man was looking past the horse, a frown deepening the lines of his forehead.

The boy turned, then let out a wild shout, springing backwards and snatching at his daggers. His boot caught a stone and he sprawled. He jumped to his feet, one blade freed and in his hand. 'It's her!' he yelled. 'The woman from the bar! She's a killer, Coll.'

'Easy, lad,' Coll said. 'She looks anything but dangerous, despite that sword on her hip. Hell,' he added, pushing himself straighter, 'if anything, she looks completely lost.'

Crokus stared at the woman, who stood at the summit's edge. 'Hood's Breath,' he muttered. Coll was right. He'd never seen anyone look so bewildered, so utterly at a loss. She was looking at them, tensed as if ready to flee. All the poise, the deadly confidence she'd possessed in the Phoenix Inn was gone, as if it had never been. Crokus sheathed his dagger.

'So,' he asked, 'what do we do now, Coll?'

The wounded man shrugged. 'Ease the girl's mind, I guess. From the looks of it, she needs some help.'

'But she killed Chert,' Crokus stated. 'I saw the blood on her knife.'

Coll squinted at the girl. 'I don't doubt you, boy, but this girl doesn't look capable of killing anyone.'

'You think I can't see that?' Crokus said. 'I'm just telling you what I saw. I know it doesn't make any sense!'

Coll sighed. 'Anyway, she still needs our help. So go and get her, Crokus.'

The boy threw up his hands. 'How do I do that?'

'Damned if I know,' Coll replied, grinning. 'Try flirting.'

Crokus threw the man a disgusted look, then he walked cautiously towards the girl. She tensed and backed a step. 'Careful!' Crokus cried, pointing at the summit's crest behind her.

The girl saw that she stood at the very edge of a steep slope. Oddly enough, this seemed to relax her. She moved a few steps closer to Crokus, her wide eyes searching his.

'That's right,' Crokus murmured. 'Everything's fine. Do you understand?' He pointed at his mouth and made talking motions.

Coll groaned.

The girl surprised them both by replying in Daru, 'I understand you,' she said haltingly. 'More now. You're not Malazan, you're not speaking Malazan. But I understand you.' She frowned. 'How?'

'Malazan, huh?' Coll said. 'Where are you from, girl?'

She thought for a moment. 'Itko Kan,' she said.

'What the hell?' Coll laughed. 'What storm blew you here?'

Realization flooded her eyes. 'Where's my father? What happened to the nets? I bought the twine, and there was that Seer – Riggalai the Seer, the wax-witch. I remember her – she died!' The girl fell to her knees. 'She died. And then—'

Coil's expression was severe, thoughtful. 'And then?'

'I don't remember,' the girl whispered, looking down at her hands. 'I don't remember anything more.' She began to cry.

'Gedderone's thousand teats,' Coll cursed quietly, waving Crokus to his side. 'Listen carefully, lad. Don't wait for us. Take this girl to your uncle. Take her to Mammot, and quickly.'

Crokus scowled. 'Why? I can't just leave you here, Coll. Who knows when Murillio and Kruppe will come around? What if that mercenary comes back?'

'What if she does?' Coll asked pointedly.

Crokus flushed and looked away.

'Murillio's a tough bastard, despite the perfume,' Coll said. 'He'll be up and dancing in no time. Take the girl to your uncle, lad. Do as I say.'

'You still haven't told me why,' Crokus said.

'It's a hunch, no more.' Coll reached up and gripped the boy's shoulder. 'This girl's been possessed. I think. Someone, something, brought her here, to Darujhistan, and on to our trail. The truth is somewhere in her head, Crokus, and it could be vital. Your uncle knows the right people, they can help her, lad. Now, saddle up my horse. I'll wait here for our friends to wake. Hell, I can't walk anyway. I shouldn't move for at least a couple of days. Kruppe and Murillio will handle things here. Go!'

Crokus eyed the weeping girl. Then he said. 'All right, Coll. We'll go back, me and her.'

'Good,' Coll grunted. 'Now, lay me out a bedroll and some food. Then ride on out of here, and if that damn horse of mine has a heart attack outside the city gates, even better. Hop to it, lad.'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dessembrae knows the sorrows
in our souls.
He walks at the side of each mortal
a vessel of regret on the fires
of vengeance.
Dessembrae knows the sorrows
and would now share them with us all.

The Lord of Tragedy
Holy Book prayer (Canon of Kassal)

The puncture wound in Lorn's left shoulder was not deep. Without magical aid, however, the risk of infection was a cause for concern. She returned to the camp to find Tool still positioned where he had been since dawn.

Ignoring the Imass, the Adjunct found her collection of herbs in her saddle bag. She sat down and leaned back against the saddle, then set to treating the wound.

It had been a foolish, unnecessary attack. Too many things had happened recently, too many ideas, too much of the woman Lorn interfering with her functions and duties as Adjunct to the Empress. She was making mistakes that she would not have made a year ago.

Tool had given her more to think about than she could handle. The words the Imass had thrown at her feet, as if in afterthought, had reached into and grasped something deep within her and now would not let go. Emotions seeped into the Adjunct, clouding the world around her. She'd abandoned sorrow long ago, along with regret. Compassion was anathema to the Adjunct. Yet now all these feelings swept through her in tides pulling her every which way. She found herself clinging to the title of Adjunct, and what it meant, as if it was a lifeline to sanity, to stability and control.

She completed cleaning the wound as best she could, then prepared a poultice. *Control.* The word rebounded in her thoughts, clipped, hard and sure. What was the heart of Empire, if not control? What shaped Empress Laseen's every act, her every thought? And what had been at the heart of the very first Empire – the great wars that shaped the T'lan Imass to this day?

She sighed and looked down at the dirt beneath her. But that was no more than we all sought, she told herself. From a young girl bringing twine home to her father, to the immortal power that had seized her for its own use. *Through the gamut of life we struggled for control, for a means to fashion the world around us, an eternal, hopeless hunt for the privilege of being able to predict the shape of our lives.*

The Imass, and his three-hundred-thousand-year-old words, had given to Lorn a sense of futility. And it worked on her, it threatened to overwhelm her.

She'd given the boy his life, surprising both him and herself. Lorn smiled ruefully. Prediction had become a privilege now lost to her. Never mind the outside world, she could not even guess her own actions, or the course of her thoughts.

Was this the true nature of emotion? she wondered. The great defier of logic, of control – the whims of being human. What lay ahead?

'Adjunct.'

Startled, Lorn looked up to see Tool standing over her. Frost covered the warrior, steaming in the heat.

'You have been wounded.'

'A skirmish,' she said gruffly, almost embarrassed. 'It's over now.' She pressed the poultice against the wound then wrapped cloth around her shoulder. It was an awkward effort, since she could use only one hand.

Tool knelt beside her. 'I will assist you, Adjunct.'

Surprised, Lorn studied the warrior's death's face. But his next words wiped out any thought of the Imass revealing compassion.

'We have little time, Adjunct. The opening awaits us.'

An expressionless mask settled over her face. She jerked a nod as Tool finished, his withered, shredded hands – the nails blunt, polished brown and curved – deftly tying a knot with the strips of cloth. 'Help me to my feet,' she commanded.

The marker had been shattered, she saw, as the Imass guided her forward. Apart from this, however, all looked unchanged. 'Where is this opening?' she asked.

Tool halted before the broken stones. 'I will lead, Adjunct. Follow closely behind me. When we are within the tomb, unsheath your sword. The deadening effect will be minimal, yet it will slow the Jaghut's return to consciousness. Enough for us to complete our efforts.'

Lorn drew a deep breath. She shrugged off her doubts. There was no turning back now. Had there ever been such a chance? The question, she realized, was a moot one: the course had been chosen for her. 'Very well,' she said. 'Lead on, Tool.'

The Imass spread out his arms to the sides. The hillside before them blurred, as if a curtain of wind-blown sand rose before it. A churning wind roiled through this strange mist. Tool stepped forward.

Following, Lorn at first recoiled at the stench that wafted into her, a stench of air poisoned by centuries of pulsing sorcery, countless wards dispersed by Tool's Tellann powers. She pushed ahead, her eyes fixing on the Imass's broad, tattered back.

They entered the hillside. A rough corridor, leading into darkness, appeared before them. Frost limned the stacked boulders forming the walls and ceiling. As they went further, the air grew bitter cold, stripped of scents, and thick green and white ropes of ice tracked the walls. The floor, which had been frozen, packed earth, became slabs of stone, slick with ice.

Numbness seeped into Lorn's extremities and her face. She saw her breath curl in a white stream, drawn inward to the darkness beyond. The corridor narrowed and she saw strange symbols painted on and within the ice

streaking the walls, dull red ochre in colour. These markings brushed something deep inside her – she almost recognized them, but as soon as she concentrated on doing so, the sensation of familiarity vanished.

Tool spoke. 'My people have visited here before,' he said, pausing to look at the Adjunct over one shoulder. 'They added their own wards to those of the Jaghut who imprisoned this Tyrant.'

Lorn was irritated. 'What of it?'

The Imass stared at her in silence, then replied, dully, 'Adjunct, I believe I know the name of this Jaghut Tyrant. I am now beset by doubts. It should not be freed. Yet, like you, I am compelled.'

Lorn's breath caught.

'Adjunct,' Tool continued, 'I acknowledge the ambivalence you have been feeling. I share it. When this is done, I shall leave.'

She was confused. 'Leave?'

Tool nodded. 'Within this tomb, and with what we will do, my vows are ended. They will bind me no longer. Such is the residual power of this sleeping Jaghut. And for that, I am thankful.'

'Why are you telling me this?'

'Adjunct, you are welcome to accompany me.'

Lorn opened her mouth, but could think of no immediate reply so shut it again.

'I ask that you consider my offer, Adjunct. I shall journey in search of an answer, and I shall find it.'

Answer? To what? she wanted to ask. Yet something stopped her, a surge of fear that said to her: You don't want to know. Remain ignorant in this. 'Let's get on with it,' she grated.

Tool resumed his march into the darkness.

After a minute Lorn asked, 'How much time is this going to take?'

'Time?' There was amusement in his voice. 'Within this barrow, Adjunct, time does not exist. The Jaghut who imprisoned their kin brought an age of ice to this land, the barrow's final seal. Adjunct, a half-league of ice stands over this burial chamber – still. We have come to a time and place before the faltering of the Jaghut ice, before the coming of the great inland sea known to the Imass as Jhagra Til, before the passing of countless ages—'

'And when we return?' Lorn interrupted. 'How much time will have passed?'

'I cannot say, Adjunct.' The Imass paused and turned back to her, his eye sockets glimmering with a sourceless light. 'I have never done this before.'

Despite the hardened leather armour, the feel of a woman pressing against Crokus's back had brought to his face more sweat than the afternoon heat could account for. Yet it was a mix of feelings that had his heart thumping against his chest. On the one hand was the bald fact that here was a girl of nearly his age, and an attractive one at that, with surprisingly strong arms wrapped around his waist and her warm, moist breath on his neck. On the other hand, this woman had murdered a man, and the only reason he could think of her arriving on the scene back there in the hills was that she'd been planning to kill him, too. So he found himself too tense to enjoy sharing the saddle with her.

They had said little to each other since leaving Coll. In another day, Crokus knew, Darujhistan's walls would come into view. He wondered if she'd remember it. And then a voice spoke in his head that sounded like Coil's: *'Why don't you ask the girl, idiot?'* Crokus scowled.

She spoke first. 'Is Itko Kan far from here?'

He thought about laughing, but something – an instinct – stopped him. Tread softly, he told himself. 'I've never heard of such a place,' he said. 'It's in the Malazan Empire?'

'Yes. We aren't in the Empire?'

Crokus growled, 'Not yet.' Then his shoulders slumped. 'We're on a continent called Genabackis. The Malazans came from the seas both east and west. They now control all the Free Cities to the north, as well as the Nathilog Confederacy.'

'Oh,' the girl replied weakly. 'You're at war with the Empire, then.'

'More or less, though you'd never know it as far as Darujhistan is concerned.'

'Is that the name of the town you live in?'

'Town? Darujhistan's a city. It's the biggest, richest city in all the land.'

There was awe and excitement in her reply. 'A city. I've never been to a city. Your name is Crokus, isn't it?'

'How did you know that?'

'That's what your soldier friend called you.'

'Oh, of course.' Why did the fact that she'd known his name send his heart lurching?

'Aren't you going to ask me my name?' the woman asked quietly.

'You can remember it?'

'No,' she admitted. 'That's strange, isn't it?'

He heard pathos in that reply, and something melted inside – making him even angrier. 'Well, I can't very well help you in that, can I?'

The woman seemed to withdraw behind him, and her arms loosened their grip. 'No.'

Abruptly his anger fell away. Crokus was ready to scream at the chaos in his head. Instead he shifted in the saddle, forcing her to clutch him tightly. Ah, he smirked, that's better. Then his eyes widened. *What am* I saying?

'Crokus?'

'What?'

'Give me a Darujhistan name. Pick one. Pick your favourite.'

'Challice,' he responded immediately. 'No, wait! You can't be Challice. I already know a Challice. You've got to be someone else.'

'Is she your girlfriend?'

'No!' he snapped. He pulled at the reins and they stopped. Crokus clawed at his hair, then threw a leg over and dropped to the ground. He pulled the reins over the horse's head. 'I want to walk,' he said.

'Yes,' she said. 'I would like to, too.'

'Well, maybe I want to run!'

She stepped round to face him, her expression troubled. 'Run? From me, Crokus?'

He saw things falling into ruins behind her eyes – what were those things? He felt a desperate need to know, but asking straight out was clearly impossible. Why it was impossible he couldn't say. It just was. He looked down at the ground and kicked at a rock. 'No,' he mumbled. 'I didn't mean that. Sorry.'

Her eyes widened. 'That was my name!' she gasped. 'That was my name, Crokus – you just said my name!'

'What?' He frowned. 'Sorry?'

'Yes!' She looked away. 'Only, it wasn't always my name. I don't think. No. It wasn't the name my father gave me.'

'Can you remember that one?'

She shook her head and ran a hand through her long, dark hair.

Crokus started walking, and the girl fell into step beside him. The road wound down through the low hills. In an hour they'd reach the Catlin Bridge. The panic that had filled him was subsiding, perhaps having burned itself out. He felt relaxed, and that surprised him, since he couldn't recall the last time he'd felt relaxed in a female's company.

They walked in silence for a time. Ahead, the sun sank down in a golden blaze, shimmering along a blue and green line on the horizon beyond the hills. Crokus pointed to the glistening line. 'That's Lake Azur. Darujhistan lies on its south shore.'

'Haven't you thought of a name for me yet?' the woman asked.

'The only name that comes to mind,' Crokus said sheepishly, 'is my matron's.'

The girl glanced at him. 'Your mother's?'

Crokus laughed. 'No, not that kind of matron. I meant the Lady of Thieves, Apsalar. Only, it's not good to take that kind of name, since she's a goddess. What about Salar?'

Her nose wrinkled. 'No, I like Apsalar. Make it Apsalar.'

'But I just said—'

'That's the name I want,' the girl insisted, her face darkening.

Uh-oh, Crokus thought. Better not press this one. 'All right.' He sighed.

'So you're a thief.'

'What's wrong with that?'

Apsalar grinned. 'Given my new name, nothing. Nothing at all, Crokus. When do we camp?'

He blanched. He hadn't thought about that. 'Maybe we should just push on,' he said warily, not meeting her eyes.

'I'm tired. Why don't we camp at this Catlin Bridge?'

'Well, I've only got the one bedroll. You can have it. I'll stand watch.'

'All night? What's there to watch out for?'

Crokus rounded on her. 'Why all these questions?' he demanded hotly. 'It's dangerous out here! Didn't you see Coil's wound? And how do we know the garrison's still there?'

'What garrison?'

Crokus cursed himself. He averted his gaze. 'The garrison on the other side of the bridge,' he said. 'But it's a long bridge—'

'Oh, come on, Crokus!' Apsalar laughed and drove her elbow into his ribs. 'We'll share the bedroll. I don't mind, so long as you keep your hands to yourself.'

Rubbing his ribs, Crokus could only stare at her.

Cursing, Kruppe glared over his shoulder at Murillio. 'Damnation! Can't you urge that beast any faster?'

The mule was living up to its reputation, refusing anything but a plodding walk. Murillio grinned sheepishly. 'What's the big hurry, Kruppe? The boy can take care of himself.'

'It was Master Baruk's explicit command that we guard him, and guard him we must!'

Murillio's eyes narrowed. 'So you keep saying,' he muttered. 'Is this some favour on Mammot's behalf? Has the boy's uncle got all worried all of a sudden? Why's Baruk so interested in Crokus? You convey the alchemist's orders, Kruppe, but you don't explain them.'

Kruppe reined in his mount. 'Oh, very well,' he said. 'Mutiny in the ranks forces Kruppe's sly hand. Oponn has chosen Crokus, for whatever purposes the devious deity may devise. Baruk would have us keep an eye on the lad and, more, prevent any other powers from finding him.'

Murillio rubbed the bruise on his forehead and winced. 'Damn you.' He sighed. 'You should've explained all this from the start, Kruppe. Does Rallick know?'

'Of course not,' Kruppe replied tartly. 'He's too busy, after all, unable to extricate himself from his various responsibilities. Hence,' Kruppe's expression turned crafty, 'the assassin's absence on this journey. But why,

pray tell, is Kruppe informing Murillio of such things? Clearly, Murillio knows more of Rallick's doings than poor, ignorant Kruppe.'

Murillio's look was blank. 'What do you mean?'

Kruppe sniggered, then kicked his mule into motion once again.

Murillio followed.

'And as for our present mission,' Kruppe continued blithely, 'what seems a vast failure, particularly on Coil's part, is in truth an astonishing success. Master Baruk must be made aware of the nefarious activities afoot in the Gadrobi Hills.'

'Success? What are you talking about?'

Kruppe waved a hand. 'Dear man, though I was conscious but a moment during the fracas, clear it was that this woman warrior possessed an Otataral sword. Which means, as any child might guess, she's Malazan.'

Murillio hissed slowly between his teeth. 'And we left Coll back there? Are you insane, Kruppe?'

'He'll mend enough to follow us shortly,' Kruppe said. 'The need for haste overwhelms all other considerations.'

'Except cheap deals with a certain stabler,' Murillio growled. 'So, there's some Malazan in the Gadrobi Hills. What's she up to? And don't try telling me you don't know. If you didn't suspect something we wouldn't be in such a hurry.'

'Suspicions, indeed.' Kruppe nodded, his shoulders hunching. 'Recall Crokus uttering that perceptive comment as we left the crossroads? Hunting a rumour, or some such thing?'

'Wait a minute.' Murillio groaned. 'Not that barrow legend again? There's not a—'

Kruppe held up a finger and cut in smoothly, 'What we believe is irrelevant, Murillio. The fact remains that the Malazans are seeking the truth of that rumour. And both Kruppe and Master Baruk suspect, being of

equal intelligence, that they might well discover it. Hence this mission, my fluttery friend.' He waggled his brows. 'Otataral in the hands of a swordmaster of the Empire. A T'lan Imass lurking in the vicinity—'

'What?' Murillio exploded, his eyes wide. He made to turn his mule around, but the beast complained and planted its hoofs. He struggled with it, cursing. 'Coil's all cut up and he's got a Malazan killer out there and an Imass! You've lost your mind, Kruppe!'

'But, dear Murillio,' Kruppe crooned, 'Kruppe would have thought you eager, nay, desperate to return to Darujhistan as quickly as possible!'

That stopped the man. He rounded on Kruppe, face darkening. 'Come on,' he gritted, 'out with it, then.'

Kruppe's brows rose. 'Out with what?'

'You've been hinting about something, poking me with it. So if you think you know something about whatever, let's hear it. Otherwise, we turn round right now and head back to Coll.' Seeing Kruppe's eyes dart, Murillio grinned. 'Hah, you thought to distract me, didn't you? Well, it's not going to work.'

Kruppe raised his hands palm up. 'No matter whose brain was responsible for your scheme to return Coll to his rightful title, Kruppe can do naught but eagerly applaud!'

Murillio's jaw dropped. *How in Hood's name did Kruppe ...?*

The man continued, 'But all that is inconsequential when faced with the fact of Crokus, and the grave danger he is presently in. More, if this young girl was indeed possessed, as Coll suspects, the risks are frightening to behold! Was she the only hunter for the lad's frail, unprotected life? What of the thousand gods and demons who would eagerly confound Oponn at the first opportunity? Thus, would Murillio, friend of long standing with Crokus, so callously abandon the child to the fates? Is Murillio a man to succumb to panic, to what-ifs, to a host of imagined nightmares slinking about within the shadows of his overwrought imagination—?'

'All right!' Murillio barked. 'Now hold your tongue and let's ride.'

Kruppe gave a brusque nod at this wise remark.

An hour later, as dusk clambered up the hillsides and ever westward to the dying sun, Murillio started and threw Kruppe a furious glare that was lost in the gloom. 'Damn him,' he whispered, 'I said I wasn't about to let him distract me. So what's the first thing he does? Distract me.'

'Murillio murmurs something?' Kruppe asked.

Murillio massaged his forehead. 'I'm having dizzy spells,' he said. 'Let's find a camp. Crokus and the girl won't make it to the city before tomorrow anyway. I doubt he's in any danger on the road, and we'll find him easily enough before tomorrow's sunset. They should be fine in the daytime – hell, they'll be with Mammot, right?'

'Kruppe admits to his own weariness. Indeed, a camp should be found, and Murillio can construct a small fire, perhaps, and so prepare dinner while Kruppe ponders vital thoughts and such.'

'Fine.' Murillio sighed. 'Just fine.'

It came to Captain Paran a couple days after his encounter with the Tiste Andii and the events within the lord's sword that Rake had not suspected him to be a Malazan soldier. Or he'd be dead. Oversights blessed him, it seemed. His assassin in Pale should have checked twice – and now the Son of Darkness, snatching him from the jaws of the Hounds, had in turn let him walk free. Was there a pattern to this? It had Oponn's flavour, yet Paran didn't doubt Rake's assertion.

Then did his luck indeed lie in his sword? And had these mercies of fortune marked pivotal moments – moments that would come back to haunt those who'd spared him? For his own well-being, he hoped not.

His was no longer the Empire's road. He'd walked that path of blood and treachery for too long. Never again. What lay before him, then, was the singular effort to save the lives of Whiskeyjack and the squad. If he managed that, he would not begrudge his own death as a consequence.

Some things went beyond a single man's life, and maybe justice existed outside the minds of humanity, beyond even the hungry eyes of gods and goddesses, a thing shining and pure and final. Some philosophers he'd read during his schooling in the Malazan capital, Unta, had asserted what seemed to him then an absurd position. Morality was not relative, they claimed, nor even existing solely in the realm of the human condition. No, they proclaimed morality as an imperative of all life, a natural law that was neither the brutal acts of beasts nor the lofty ambitions of humanity, but something other, something unassailable.

Just another hunt for certainty. Paran scowled and stiffened in his saddle, his eyes fixed on the trader track winding before him through low, rounded hills. He recalled discussing this with Adjunct Lorn, at a time when neither had been compelled by the outside world. Just another hunt for certainty, she'd said, in a voice brittle and cynical, putting an end to the discussion as clearly as if she'd driven a knife into the wine-stained table between them.

For such words to have come from a woman no older than him, Paran suspected then, as he did now, that her particular view had been no more than an easy, lazy mimicry of Empress Laseen's. But Laseen had a right to it and Lorn did not. At least, in Paran's mind. If anyone had a right to world-weary cynicism, it was the Empress of the Malazan Empire.

Truly had the Adjunct made herself Laseen's extension. But at what cost? He'd seen the young woman behind the mask just once – as they'd looked out over a road carpeted with dead soldiers then proceeded to pick their way through them. The pale, frightened girl that was Lorn had shown herself in a single frail moment. He couldn't remember what had triggered the return of the mask – likely it had been something he'd said, something he'd tossed off in his own guise as a hardened soldier.

Paran sighed deeply. Too *many regrets. Lost chances – and with each one passing the less human we all became, and the deeper into the nightmare of power we all sank.*

Was his life irretrievable? He wished he had an answer to that question.

Movement in the south caught his attention, and with it he became aware of a rumbling sound, rising up from the earth around him. He rose in the saddle. A wall of dust curled over the ridge of land directly ahead. He swung his mount westward and nudged it into a trot. Moments later he reined in. The curtains of dust hung in that direction as well. Cursing, he spurred to the crest of a nearby rise. Dust. Dust on all sides. A *storm? No, the thunder is too regular.* He rode down to the plain below and reined in again, wondering what to do. The dust wall rose, cresting the hill he faced. The deep rumbling grew. Paran squinted into the dust. Dark, massive shapes moved there, spreading out to either side, sweeping down on his position. In moments he was surrounded.

Bhederin. He'd heard tales of the huge shaggy creatures, moving across the inner plains in herds half a million strong.

On all sides, Paran could see nothing but the humped reddish-brown, dust-caked backs of the beasts. There was nowhere he could lead his horse, no place of safety within sight. Paran leaned back in his saddle and waited.

Something flashed to his left, tawny and low to the ground. The captain half turned, just as something heavy hammered him from the right and clung, dragging him from the saddle. Cursing, Paran thumped heavily in the dust, grappling with wiry limbs, ragged black hair. He drove his knee up, connecting with a solid stomach. His attacker rolled to one side, gasping. Paran scrambled to his feet, found himself facing a youth in tanned hides. The boy sprang to close with the captain once again.

Paran sidestepped and clouted the boy on the side of the head. His attacker sprawled unconscious.

Piercing cries were sounding on all sides. The Bhederin were parting, moving away. Figures emerged, closing on Paran's position. Rhivi. Sworn enemies to the Empire, allied in the north with Caladan Brood and the Crimson Guard.

Two warriors came to the unconscious boy's side; each took an arm and dragged him off.

The herd had come to a stop.

Another warrior approached, striding boldly up to Paran. His dust-streaked face was stitched with dyed threads, black and red, from high on the cheeks down to the jawline then up and around the mouth. A Bhederin hide rode the broad line of his shoulders. Stopping less than an arm's length in front of Paran, the warrior reached out and closed his hand on the grip of Chance. Paran struck away the hand. The Rhivi smiled, stepped back and loosed a high-pitched, ululating cry.

Figures rose on the backs of the surrounding Bhederin, lances balanced in one hand as they crouched on the shaggy backs. The huge animals beneath the warriors ignored them as if they were but tick-birds.

The two Rhivi who had taken the boy away now returned, joining the stitch-faced warrior, who said something to the one on his left. This man moved forward. Before Paran could react, he surged into motion, throwing a leg behind the captain then driving his shoulder into Paran's chest.

The warrior fell on top of him. A knife blade slid against the line of Paran's jaw, sliced through the helmet strap. The iron skullcap was pulled away and fingers snagged a handful of his hair. Dragging the warrior with him, Paran pushed himself upright. He'd had enough. Death was one thing, death without dignity quite another. As the Rhivi's hand twisted, pulling his head up, the captain reached between the warrior's legs and found his own handful. He yanked hard.

The warrior shrieked, releasing Paran's hair. A knife appeared again, flashing at the captain's face. He ducked to one side, his free hand snapping up to grasp the wrist, pushing away the knife. He squeezed once more with his other hand. The Rhivi shrieked again, then Paran let go, twisted round and drove his armoured elbow into the man's face.

Blood spattered like rain in the dust. The warrior reeled back, crumpled to the ground.

A lance haft hammered a glancing blow along Paran's temple. He spun round with the impact. A second lance struck him in the hip, hard as a kick from a horse, numbing his leg. Something pinned his left foot to the ground.

Paran unsheathed Chance. The weapon was almost knocked from his hand with a ringing, pealing sound. He swung it upward and it was struck again. Half blinded with pain, sweat and dust, Paran reared upright, shifting to a two-handed grip and drawing Chance down to a centre guard position. The sword's blade was struck a third time, but he retained his grip.

There was silence. Gasping, blinking, Paran raised his head, looked around.

Rhivi surrounded him, but none moved. Their dark eyes were wide.

Paran flicked his gaze to his weapon, glared back up and around at the warriors, then his eyes returned to Chance. And stayed there.

Three iron lanceheads sprouted from the blade like leaves, each point split and jammed, the hafts shattered and gone, leaving only white wood jutting out from the sockets.

He looked down at his pinned foot. A lance had struck, through his boot, but the wide blade of the head was turned, its flat side pressing against his foot. Splintered wood surrounded him. Paran glanced at his hip, saw no wound. A jagged tear marred the leather of Chance's scabbard.

The Rhivi warrior with the smashed face lay motionless a few feet from where Paran stood. The captain saw that his mount and the packhorses were untouched and had not moved. The other Rhivi had pulled back. The encirclement now divided as a small figure approached.

A girl, perhaps no more than five years old. The warriors moved aside from her as if in awe, or fear, possibly both. She wore antelope skins tied with cord at the waist, and nothing on her feet.

There was something familiar about her, a way of walking, her stance as she stopped before him – something in her heavy-lidded eyes – that made Paran frown uneasily.

The girl stopped to regard him, her small round face slowly coming to mirror Paran's own frown. She raised one hand, as if reaching for him, then dropped it. The captain found he could not pull away his eyes from her. Child, *do* I *know you?*

As the silence between them lengthened, an old woman came up behind the girl, rested a wrinkled hand on her shoulder. Looking worn, almost exasperated, the old woman studied the captain. The girl beside her said something, the quick lilting language of the Rhivi, surprisingly low-pitched for one so young. The old woman crossed her arms. The girl spoke again, insistently.

The old woman addressed Paran in Daru, 'Five lances claimed you as our enemy.' She paused. 'Five lances were wrong.'

'You've plenty more,' Paran said.

'So we have, and the god favouring your sword has no followers here.'

'So finish it,' Paran growled. 'I'm tired of the game.'

The girl spoke, a tone of command that rang like iron on stone.

The old woman turned in obvious surprise.

The girl continued, her words now evidently explanatory. The old woman listened, then swung her dark, glittering gaze back to the captain. 'You are Malazan, and Malazans have chosen to be the enemies of the Rhivi. Is this choice yours as well? And know this: I will recognize a lie when I hear it.'

'I am Malazan by birth,' Paran said. 'I have no interest in calling the Rhivi my enemy. I would rather have no enemies at all.'

The old woman blinked. 'She offers you words to ease your grief, soldier.'

'Meaning?'

'You are to live.'

Paran did not quite trust this turn of events. 'What words has she for me? I've never seen her before.'

'Nor has she seen you before. Yet you know each other.'

'No, we don't.'

The old woman's eyes hardened. 'Will you hear her words or not? She offers you a gift. Will you throw it back in her face?'

Profoundly uneasy, he said. 'No, I suppose not.'

'The child says you need not grieve. The woman you know has not passed through the Arching Trees of Death. Her journey was beyond the lands you can see, beyond those of the spirit that all mortals sense. And now she has returned. You must be patient, soldier. You will meet again, so this child promises.'

'Which woman?' Paran demanded, his heart pounding.

'The one you thought dead.'

He looked again at the girl. The familiarity returned like a blow to his chest. He staggered back a step. 'Not possible,' he whispered.

The girl withdrew, dust swirling. She vanished.

'Wait!'

Another cry sounded. The herd lurched into motion, closing in, obscuring the Rhivi. In moments all Paran could see were the backs of the giant beasts, shuffling past. He thought to push among them, but knew it would bring him only death.

'Wait!' the captain shouted again, but the sound of hundreds – thousands – of hoofs on the plain drowned his efforts.

Tattersail!

It was fully an hour before the Bhederin herd's tail end appeared. As the last of the beasts strolled past the captain, he looked around. The wind rolled the dust cloud eastward, over the sloping, humped hills.

Paran climbed into the saddle, swung his mount southward once again. The hills of Gadrobi rose before him. *Tattersail, what did you do?* He recalled Toc noting the trail of small prints leading from the scorched pillar that had been all that was left of Bellurdan and Tattersail. *Hood's Breath, did you plan such a thing? And why the Rhivi? Reborn, already a child of five, maybe six – are you even mortal any more, woman? Have you*

ascended? You've found yourself a people, a strange, primitive people – to what end? And when we next meet, how old will you appear to be then?

He thought again about the Rhivi. They'd been driving the herd north, a herd big enough to feed ... *an army on the march. Caladan Brood –he's on his way to Pale. That is something I don't think Dujek's prepared for. Old Onearm's in trouble.*

He had another two hours of riding before sunset. Beyond the Gadrobi Hills was Lake Azur, and the city of Darujhistan. And within the city, Whiskeyjack and his squad. *And in that squad, a young woman I've been preparing to meet for three years. The god possessing her –is he even my enemy any more?*

The question arrived unbidden, turning his heart cold. *Gods, what a journey this has been, and here I had thought to travel this plain unnoticed. A foolish thought. Scholars and mages write endlessly of fell convergences – it seems I am a walking convergence, a lodestone to draw Ascendants. To their peril, it seems.* My *sword Chance answered those five lances, despite my treatment of one of the* Twins. *How to explain that? The truth is, my cause has become my own.* Not *the Adjunct's, not the Empire's. I said I'd rather have no enemies at all – and the old woman saw those as true words. And so, it seems, they are.*

Endless surprises, Ganoes Paran. Ride on, see what comes.

The track climbed a hillside and the captain spurred his horse up the slope. Reaching the summit, he yanked hard on the reins. The horse snorted indignantly and swung her head round, eyes rolling. But Paran's attention was elsewhere. He leaned back in the saddle and loosened his sword.

A heavily armoured man struggled to his feet beside a small campfire. Beyond him was a hobbled mule. The man tottered, his weight on one leg, and unsheathed a bastard sword, which he then leaned on as he regarded the captain.

Paran nudged his mount forward, scanning the immediate area. It seemed that the warrior was alone. He brought his horse to a halt with thirty feet between them.

The man spoke in Daru. 'I'm in no shape for a fight, but if you want one it's yours.'

Once again Paran found himself thankful for the Adjunct's insistence that he be thoroughly schooled: his reply was as fluent as this native's. 'No. I've lost the taste for it.' He waited, leaning forward in the saddle, then grinned at the mule. 'Is that beast a War Mule?'

The man barked a laugh. 'I'm sure it thinks it is,' he said, relaxing. 'I've food to spare, traveller, if you're of a mind.'

The captain dismounted and approached. 'My name's Paran,' he said. He sat down by the fire.

The other followed suit, the fire between them. 'Coll,' he grunted, stretching out a bandaged leg. 'You down from the north?'

'Genabaris, initially. Spent some time in Pale, recently.'

Coil's brows rose at that. 'You've the look of a mercenary,' he said, 'though likely an officer. I heard it was pretty bad up there.'

'I arrived a little late,' Paran admitted. 'Saw lots of rubble and lots of dead, so I'm inclined to believe the stories.' He hesitated, then said, 'There was a rumour in Pale that Moon's Spawn is now over Darujhistan.'

Coll grunted, tossing a handful of sticks on to the fire. 'So it is,' he said. He gestured at a battered pot tucked against the coals. 'That's stew, if you're hungry. Help yourself.'

Paran realized he was famished. He accepted Coil's offer gratefully. As he ate, using a wooden spoon the man loaned him, he thought to ask about that leg wound. But then he recalled his Claw training. When you play a soldier, you play it to the hilt. Nobody talks about what's obvious. Something staring you in the eye, you look around it and grumble about the weather. Anything important will come out in its own time. Soldiers have nothing to

look forward to, making patience an easy virtue, and sometimes it's not just a virtue, but a contest of indifference. So Paran emptied the pot, while Coll waited in casual silence, poking at the fire and adding the occasional stick from an enormous pile behind him – where the wood had come from was anybody's guess.

Finally, Paran wiped his mouth with his sleeve and scrubbed the spoon as clean as he could manage without water. He sat back then, and belched.

Coll spoke. 'You heading into Darujhistan, then?'

'I am. And you?'

'Should be able to manage it in another day or so, though I can't say I'm looking forward to riding into the city on the back of a mule.'

Paran looked westward. 'Well,' he said, squinting, 'sun's about down. Mind if I share this camp for the night?'

'By all means.'

The captain rose and attended to his horses. He thought about delaying a day to let this man mend some more, then lending him a horse. If he rode into the city in the company of a local, there'd be advantages – someone to direct him, perhaps even give him a place to stay for a day or two. Not only that, but he might learn something in the meantime. Would another day matter? Possibly, but it looked worth it. He hobbled the Wickan horses near the mule, then carried his saddle back to the fire.

'Been thinking about your problem,' Paran said, as he dropped the saddle and sat with his back against it. 'I'll ride in with you. You can use my pack horse.'

Coil's eyes were alert. 'A generous offer.'

Seeing the man's suspicion, Paran smiled. 'The horses could use the extra day's rest, for one. Second, I've never before been to Darujhistan, so in exchange for my so-called generosity I'd like to plague you with endless questions in the next two days. After that, I get my horse back and you're on your way, and if anyone's come out ahead, it's me.'

'Better warn you now, Paran, I'm not much of a talker.'

'I'll take the risk.'

Coll considered for a time. 'Hell,' he said, 'I'd be mad not to accept, wouldn't I? You don't look the type to stick me in the back. I don't know your real story, Paran. If that's something you want to keep to yourself, that's your business. That won't stop me from asking questions, though. It's up to you whether you lie or not.'

'I think that goes both ways, doesn't it?' Paran responded. 'Well, you want my story straight? Fine, here it is, Coll. I'm a deserter from the Malazan Army, ranked as captain. I also did a lot of work with the Claw, and looking back on it that's where the trouble started. Anyway, it's done.' *Oh, yes, and one more* thing: *people who get close to me usually end up dead.*

Coll was silent, his eyes glittering in the firelight and fixed on the man opposite him. Then he puffed his cheeks and blew out a loud breath of air. 'Truth as bald as that makes a challenge, don't it?' He stared into the fire, then leaned back on his elbows and lifted his face to the stars now appearing overhead. 'I was once a noble in Darujhistan, the last son of a long-lined, powerful family. I was set for an arranged marriage but I fell in love with another woman – a hungry, ambitious woman, though I was blind to that.' He smiled wryly. 'She was a whore, in fact, only where most whores I've met are pretty down-to-earth, she was as twisted a soul as you could imagine.'

He passed a hand across his eyes. 'Anyway, I refuted my obligations and broke off the arranged marriage. It killed my father, I think, when I married Aystal – that was the whore's name, though she's changed it since.' He laughed harshly at the night sky. 'Didn't take her long. I'm still not sure how she managed the details, how many men she took to bed to buy their influence, or how they did it. All I know is I woke up one day and found myself stripped of title, stripped even of my family name. The estate was hers, the money was hers, it was all hers, and her need for me had ended.'

The flames licked the dry wood between them. Paran said nothing. He sensed that more was to come from the man opposite him, and that Coll was

struggling with it.

'But that wasn't the worst betrayal, Paran,' he said at length, meeting the captain's eyes. 'Oh, no. That came when I walked away from it. I could've fought her. I might even have won.' His jaw tautened – the only hint of anguish that escaped his self-control – then he continued, in a flat, empty voice, 'Acquaintances I'd known for decades looked right through me. To everyone I was dead. They chose not to hear me. They just walked past, or didn't even come to the gates of their estates when I called on them. I was dead, Paran, even the city's records claimed it. And so I agreed with them. I walked away. Disappeared. It's one thing to have your friends mourn your passing in your face. But it's another to betray your own life, Paran. But, as you said, it's done.'

The captain looked away, squinting into the darkness. What's this human urge, he wondered, that brings us to such devastation? 'The games of the high born,' he said quietly, 'span the world. I was born a noble, like you, Coll. But in Malaz we'd met our match in the old Emperor. He crushed us at every turn until we cowered like whipped dogs. Cowered for years. But it was only an issue of power, wasn't it?' he said, more to himself than to the man who shared the fire. 'There are no lessons worthy enough for a noble to heed. I look back on my years within that twisted, hungry company – I look back on that life now, Coll, and I see it wasn't a life at all.' He was silent for a time, then a slow smile curved his mouth and his gaze swung to Coll. 'Since I walked away from the Malazan Empire, and severed once and for all the dubious privileges of my noble blood, damn, I've never felt so alive. It was never a life before, only the palest shadow of what I've now found. Is that a truth most of us are too frightened to face?'

Coll grunted. 'I'm not the sharpest man you'll meet, Paran, and your thoughts are running a touch too deep for me. But if I understand you right, you're sitting there looking at a chopped-up old fool of a man and you're telling him he's alive. Right now. As alive as can be. And whatever he betrayed back then, it wasn't life, was it?'

'You tell me, Coll.'

The man grimaced and ran a hand through his thinning hair. 'The thing is, I want it back. I want it all back.'

Paran burst out laughing, and continued to laugh until sharp pains cramped his stomach.

Coll sat watching him, then a low, rumbling chuckle rose from his chest. He reached back, retrieved a handful of sticks and tossed them into the fire, one at a time. 'Well, dammit, Paran,' he said, amused lines crinkling around his eyes, 'you've come out of the blue like a god-sent bolt of lightning. And I appreciate it. I appreciate it more than you'll ever know.'

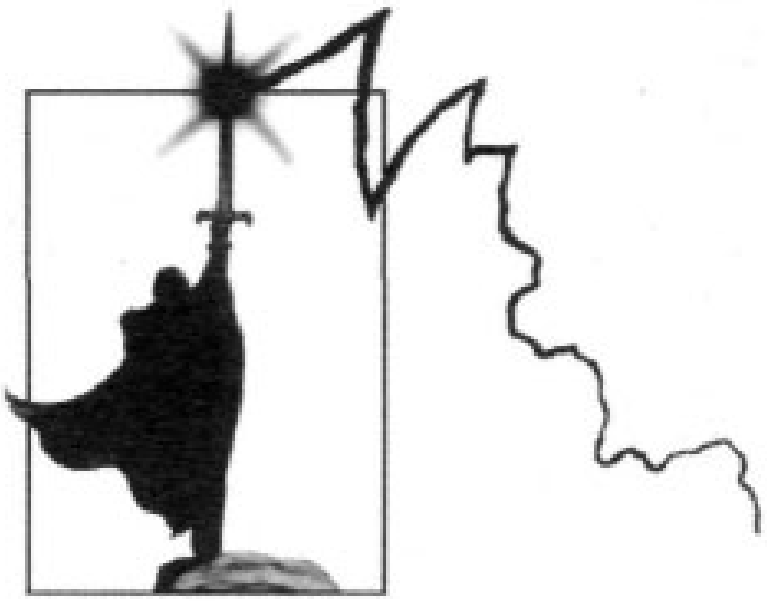
Paran wiped tears from his eyes. 'Hood's Breath,' he said. 'Just one War Mule talking to another, right?'

'I guess so, Paran. Now, if you'll look in that pack of mine, you'll find a jug of Worrytown wine. Its vintage is about a week.'

The captain rose. 'Meaning?'

'Meaning it's running out of time.'

BOOK SIX



THE CITY
OF
BLUE FIRE

Rumours like tattered flags
wind-snapped and echoing
in the streets below
told the tale of the days upon us ...
'Twas said an eel had slipped ashore
or not one but a thousand
under a jagged moon that might be dead,
'twas whispered that a claw scraped slow
on the city's cobbles, even as a dragon
was seen sailing high silver and black in the nightsky.
'Twas heard, they say, a demon's death cry
on the rooftops on a night of blood, even
as the master's hundred hands lost
a hundred daggers to the dark,
and 'twas rumoured then, a lady
masked highborn had offered to unbidden guests
a fete to remember ...

Rumour Born
Fisher (b.?)

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Few can see
the dark hand
holding aloft
the splinter, or
the notched chains
fated to be heard
before death's rattle,
but hark the wheel
of minions and victims
who moan the
lord's name
in the dark heart
of Moon's Spawn ...

Silverfox

Outrider Hurlochel,
6th Army

As Rallick Nom approached the Phoenix Inn from the alleyway, a large, beefy woman stepped out from a shadowed niche and confronted him. He raised an eyebrow. 'You want something, Meese?'

'Never mind what I want.' She grinned invitingly. 'You've known about that for years. Anyway, I come to tell ya something, Nom. So relax.'

He crossed his arms and waited.

Meese glanced back up the alley, then hunched close to the assassin. 'There's someone in the bar. Been asking for ya. By name.'

Startled, Rallick straightened. 'What's he look like?' he asked casually.

'Like a soldier outa uniform,' Meese replied. 'Never seen him around before. So what do ya think, Nom?'

He looked away. 'Nothing. Where's he sitting?'

Meese grinned again. 'At Kruppe's table. Home ground. Now ain't that fine?'

Rallick stepped past the woman and headed towards the inn. As she moved to follow he held out his hand. 'A minute between us, Meese,' he said, without turning. 'Where's Irilta?'

'Inside,' she said, behind him. 'Good luck, Nom.'

'Luck's never free,' Rallick muttered, as he turned the corner and climbed the steps.

He stood still just within the door and surveyed the crowd. A few strangers, not enough to cause him concern, however. His gaze slid across to a man sitting at Kruppe's table. He almost had to take a second look, so nondescript was he. Then Rallick strode straight for him, the crowd parting as he went – something he'd never noticed before. Amused, he held his eyes on the stranger until he was noticed. They locked gazes, though the man made no move other than to take a sip from his tankard then set it down carefully on the table.

Rallick pulled out a chair and dragged it opposite. 'I'm Rallick Nom.'

There was something solid about this person, a kind of assurance that was calming. Rallick felt himself relaxing in spite of his habitual caution. The man's first words changed that, however.

'The Eel has a message for you,' he said quietly. 'Direct, by word of mouth only. Before I deliver it, though, I'm to give you some background – as only I can.' He paused to drink from the tankard, then resumed. 'Now, Turban Orr has hired another dozen hunters. What are they hunting? Well, me, for one. Your problem is that he's going to be harder to reach. The Eel approves of your efforts concerning Lady Simtal. Coil's return is desired by all who value integrity and honour within the Council. If you require anything, ask now and it's yours.'

Rallick's eyes had hardened. 'Never knew Murillio had such a big mouth,' he said.

The man shook his head. 'Your compatriot has revealed nothing. Nor have you. It is the Eel's business. Now, what do you require?'

'Nothing.'

'Good.' The stranger nodded, as if he'd expected that reply and was pleased. 'Incidentally, Turban Orr's efforts to pass the proclamation have been ... impeded. Indefinitely. The Eel wishes to thank you for your unwitting role in that. Nevertheless, the councilman explores other options. He has been watched closely. Hence our fortunate discovery that is at the heart of the Eel's message to you. Last night, beneath Despot's Barbican, Turban Orr met with a representative of the Assassins' Guild – how he managed that was quite a feat, considering how difficult your comrades have been to find. In any case, a contract was tendered by Turban Orr.' The man waited for the shock to wear off Rallick's face, then continued. 'Tendered by Turban Orr, as I said, but not on his own behalf. Rather, Lady Simtal has decided that Coil's death should be a fact in the real world as it is on paper.'

'Who?' Rallick rasped. 'Who was the contact?'

'I'm coming to that. First, it was accepted, for the payment was substantial. They are aware that Coll is presently outside Darujhistan. They simply await his return.'

'The assassin's name.'

'Ocelot.' The man rose. 'The Eel wishes you success in all your ventures, Rallick Nom. Thus the message ends. Good evening.' He turned to leave.

'Wait.'

'Yes?'

'Thank you,' Rallick said.

The stranger smiled, then left.

The assassin took the man's seat, and leaned against the wall. He waved at Sulty, who had a pitcher of ale and a tankard waiting. She hurried over. Behind her strode, at a more leisurely pace, Irilta and Meese. They sat down without preamble, each with her own tankard.

'Everybody's still breathing,' Irilta said, raising her drink. 'And here's t' that.'

Meese lifted hers as well and the two women drank deep. Then Meese bent forward. 'Any word of Kruppe and the boy?'

Rallick shook his head. 'I may not be here when they come back,' he said. 'Tell Murillio to go ahead if I don't show, and if other ... events occur. And, if that happens, tell him our man's eyes are open.' Rallick filled his tankard and drained it immediately. Then he rose. 'Don't wish me luck,' he said.

'How about success?' Meese asked, a worried expression on her broad face.

Rallick jerked his head in a nod. Then he left the inn.

Anomander Rake was hiding something. Baruk was certain of it as he stared moodily into the fireplace. In his right hand was a goblet of goat's milk, and in his left a large fragment of Daru flatbread. Why had the Tiste Andii permitted the Imass to enter the barrow? He'd asked that question already of the Lord sitting beside him, but an answer didn't seem forthcoming. Instead, all the alchemist got from Rake was that irritating smugness. Baruk took a bite from the flatbread, the crack loud between them.

Rake stretched out his legs and sighed. 'An odd hour to dine,' he said.

'All my hours have been odd, lately,' Baruk said, around the bread. He drank a mouthful of milk.

'I'd no idea that both the Shadow Lord and Oponn had become involved in affairs,' Rake said.

Baruk felt the Lord's eyes on him, but he remained staring at the fire. 'I had an intimation of Oponn,' he said. 'But nothing definite.'

Rake snorted in reply.

Baruk downed some more milk. 'You hold your hunches close to your chest. I do the same.'

'This avails us nothing,' Rake snapped.

The alchemist turned in his chair to face the Tiste Andii. 'Your ravens watched that woman and the T'lan Imass enter the barrow. Do you still believe they will fail?'

'Do you?' Rake retorted. 'I seem to recall that that was your position on the matter, Baruk. As far as I was and am concerned, I don't much care whether they succeed or not. Either way, there'll be a fight. I suspect you'd imagined there would be a way to avoid one. Obviously, your intelligence concerning the Malazan Empire is sorely lacking. Laseen knows only one thing, and that's force. She'll ignore power until it's unveiled, and then she'll hit you with everything at her disposal.'

'And you just wait for it to happen?' Baruk scowled. 'That's how cities are destroyed. That's how thousands of people die. Does any of that matter to you, Anomander Rake? So long as you win in the end?'

A tight smile played on the Lord's thin lips. 'An accurate assessment, Baruk. In this case, however, Laseen wants Darujhistan intact. I mean to prevent that. But destroying the city to defy her would be too easy. I could have managed that weeks ago. No, I want Darujhistan to remain as it is. Yet out of Laseen's reach. That, Alchemist, is victory.' His grey eyes were on Baruk. 'I would not have sought an alliance with you otherwise.'

The alchemist frowned. 'Unless you plan treachery.'

Rake was silent for a time, studying his hands clasped on his lap. 'Baruk,' he said softly, 'as any commander of long standing knows, treachery breeds its own. Once committed, whether against an enemy or an ally, it becomes a legitimate choice for everyone in your command, from the lowest private seeking promotion, to your personal aides, bodyguards and officers. My

people know of our alliance with you, Alchemist. If I were to betray it, I would not long remain the Lord of Moon's Spawn. And rightly so.'

Baruk smiled. 'And who could challenge your power, Rake?'

'Caladan Brood, for one,' Rake replied immediately. 'And then there's my four assassin mages. Even Silanah, the dweller within the Moon's caverns, might take it upon herself to exact judgement on me. I can think of others, Baruk, many others.'

'So fear holds you in check, Son of Darkness?'

Rake scowled. 'That title is held by those fools who think me worthy of worship. I dislike it, Baruk, and would not hear it again from you. Does fear hold me in check? No. As powerful as fear is, it is no match for what compels me. Duty.' The Lord's eyes had shifted into a dun tone as they remained fixed on his hands, which he now turned palms up. 'You have a duty to your city, Baruk. It drives you, shapes you. I'm no stranger to such a thing. Within Moon's Spawn are the last of the Tiste Andii on this world. We are dying, Alchemist. No cause seems great enough to return to my people the zest for life. I try, but inspiration has never been a great talent of mine. Even this Malazan Empire could not make us rise to defend ourselves – until we ran out of places to run to.

'We still die on this continent. Better that it be by the sword.' He let his hands slip from his lap. 'Imagine your spirit dying while your body lives on. Not for ten years, not for fifty. But a body that lives on for fifteen, twenty thousand years.'

Rake rose swiftly. He looked down upon a silent Baruk, and smiled a smile that launched a dagger of pain into the alchemist's heart. 'Thus duty holds me, yet a duty that is in itself hollow. Is it enough to preserve the Tiste Andii? Simply preserve them? Do I raise Moon's Spawn into the heavens, where we live on, beyond any risk, any threat? What, then, will I be preserving? A history, a particular point of view.' He shrugged. 'The history is done, Baruk, and the Tiste Andii point of view is one of disinterest, stoicism and quiet, empty despair. Are these gifts to the world worthy of preservation? I think not.'

Baruk had no immediate response. What Anomander Rake had described was almost beyond comprehension, yet its anguished cry reached through to the alchemist. 'And yet,' he said, 'here you are. Allied with the Empire's victims. Do you stand alone in this, Anomander Rake? Do your people approve?'

'They care not,' Rake said. 'They accept my commands. They follow me. They serve Caladan Brood when I ask them to. And they die in the mud and forests of a land that is not their own, in a war not their own, for a people who are terrified of them.'

Baruk sat forward. 'Then why? Why do you do all this?'

A harsh laugh was Rake's response. After a moment, however, his bitter amusement fell away and he said, 'Is an honourable cause worth anything these days? Does it matter that we've borrowed it? We fight as well as any man. We die alongside them. Mercenaries of the spirit. And even that is a coin we scarcely value. Why? It doesn't matter why. But we never betray our allies.

'I know you are worried that I did nothing to prevent the T'lan Imass from entering the barrow. I believe the Jaghut Tyrant will be freed, Baruk. But better now, with me here beside you, than at some other time when the Jaghut has no one capable of opposing him. We'll take this legend and carve the life from it, Alchemist, and never again will the threat haunt you.'

Baruk stared at the Tiste Andii. 'Are you that certain you'll be able to destroy the Jaghut?'

'No. But when it is finished with us, it will have been much reduced. Then it falls to others – to your Cabal, in fact. There's no certainty in this, Baruk. That seems a fact particularly galling to you humans. You'd better learn to accept it. We may well be able to destroy the Jaghut Tyrant, but even this will serve Laseen's plans.'

The alchemist was bemused. 'I don't understand.'

Rake grinned. 'When we are finished with it, *we* will have been much reduced. And then will come the powers of the Malazan Empire. So, you

see, either way she wins. If anything has her worried, it's your T'orrud Cabal, Baruk. Of your abilities she knows nothing. Which is why her agents seek this Vorcan. The Guild Master accepting the contract will solve the problem you represent.'

'Yet,' Baruk mused, 'there are other factors involved.'

'Oponn,' Rake stated. 'That is a danger to everyone involved. Do you think Oponn cares for a mortal city? For its people? It is the nexus of power that matters to Oponn, the whirlwind where games get nasty. Will immortal blood be spilled? That's the question the gods are eager to have answered.'

Baruk stared down at his goblet of goat's milk. 'Well, at least we've avoided that so far.' He took a sip.

'Wrong,' Rake said. 'Forcing Shadowthrone out of the game marked the first spilling of immortal blood.'

Baruk almost choked on the milk. He set down the goblet and stared up at the Tiste Andii. 'Whose?'

'Two Hounds died by my sword. Knocked Shadowthrone somewhat off-balance, I believe.'

Baruk leaned back and closed his eyes. 'Then the stakes have risen,' he said.

'As far as Moon's Spawn, Alchemist.' Rake returned to his chair and sat, once again stretching his legs out to the fire's warmth. 'Now, what more can you tell me about this Jaghut Tyrant? I recall you said you wished to consult an authority.'

Baruk opened his eyes and tossed the flatbread into the fire. 'There's a problem there, Rake. I'm hoping you can help explain what's happened. Please,' he said, rising, 'follow me.'

Grunting, Rake climbed back to his feet. This night he'd not worn his sword. To Baruk the Lord's broad back looked incomplete, but he was thankful for the weapon's absence.

He led Rake from the room and down the central stairs to the lower chambers. The first of these subterranean rooms held a narrow cot, and on the cot lay an old man. Baruk indicated him. 'As you see, he appears to be sleeping. He is named Mammot.'

Rake raised an eyebrow. 'The historian?'

'Also a High Priest of D'rek.'

'That explains the cynicism in his writings,' Rake said, grinning. 'The Worm of Autumn breeds an unhappy lot.'

Baruk was surprised that this Tiste Andii had read Mammot's *Histories* but, then, why not? A life spanning twenty thousand years necessitated hobbies, he supposed.

'So,' Rake said, striding to the bed, 'this Mammot sleeps a deep sleep. What triggered it?' He crouched before the old man.

Baruk joined him. 'That is the odd part. I admit to knowing little of earth magic. D'riss is a Warren I've never explored. I called on Mammot, as I indicated to you, and upon his arrival I asked him to tell me all he knew of the Jaghut Tyrant and the barrow. He promptly sat down and closed his eyes. They've yet to open, and he's not uttered a single word since.'

Rake straightened. 'He took your request seriously, I see.'

'What do you mean?'

'As you guessed, he opened his D'riss Warren. He sought to answer your question by rather, shall we say, direct means. And now something's trapped him.'

'He travelled by Warren to the Jaghut Tyrant's barrow? The old fool!'

'Into a concentration of Tellann sorcery, not to mention Jaghut Omtose Phellack. On top of all that, a woman with an Otataral sword.' Rake crossed his arms. 'He'll not come round until both the T'lan Imass and the Otataral have left the barrow. And even then, if he's not quick, the awakening Jaghut might take him.'

A chill burgeoned in Baruk's bones. 'Take, as in possession?'

Rake nodded, his expression grim. 'A High Priest, is he? The Jaghut would find him very useful. Not to mention the access Mammot provides to D'rek. Do you know, Baruk, if this Tyrant's capable of enslaving a goddess?'

'I don't know,' Baruk whispered, sweat trickling down his round face as he stared at Mammot's recumbent form. 'Dessembrae fend,' he added.

The old woman sitting on the tenement steps squinted at the late afternoon sky while she tamped dried Italbe leaves into her steatite pipe. On the wooden steps beside her was a small covered bronze brazier. Thin kindling sticks jutted from holes around the bowl. The old woman withdrew one and set it to her pipe, then tossed it into the street.

The man walking down the opposite side of the street caught the signal and ran a hand through his hair. Circle Breaker felt near to panic. This taking to the streets was far too risky. Turban Orr's hunters were close to him – he could feel it with dread certainty. Sooner or later, the councilman would recall his many meetings beneath Despot's Barbican, and the guard who'd been stationed there every time. This brazen showing of himself compromised everything.

He turned a corner, passing beyond the old woman's sight, and. continued for three blocks until he came opposite the Phoenix Inn. Two women lounged by the door, laughing at some joke between them.

Circle Breaker tucked his thumbs into his sword-belt and angled the scabbard out to the side. Its bronze-capped end scraped against the stone wall beside him. Then he withdrew his hands and continued on his way towards Lakefront. *Well, it's done.* All that remained for him was one final contact, possibly redundant, but he would follow the Eel's orders. Things were coming to a head. He did not expect to live much longer, but he'd do what he must until that time. What more could be asked of him?

At the entrance of the Phoenix Inn, Meese nudged Irilta. 'That's it,' she muttered. 'You do the back-up this time. Usual pattern.'

Irilta scowled, then nodded. 'Head off, then.'

Meese descended the steps and turned up the street. She reversed the route taken by Circle Breaker until she reached the tenement. She saw the old woman still sitting there, lazily watching passers-by. As Meese passed through her line of vision, the old woman removed the pipe from her mouth and tapped it against the heel of her shoe. Sparks rained on to the cobbles.

That was the signal. Meese came to the corner of the block, then turned right and entered the alley running the building's length. A door opened for her a third of the way down and she strode into a dimly lit room with an open door beyond. Someone hid behind the first door but she did not acknowledge that someone's presence. She passed through the second, inner door and found herself in a hallway. From there it was a quick jog up the stairs.

Apsalar – or Sorry, as she had been known before – hadn't been much impressed by her first sight of Darujhistan. For some reason, despite her excitement and anticipation, it had all seemed too familiar.

Disappointed, Crokus had wasted no time in taking her to his uncle's home once they'd stabled Coil's horse. The journey to the city, and then through its crowded streets, had been, for Crokus, a continual storm of confusion. This woman seemed to have a knack for catching him off-guard, and all he desired now was to throw her into someone else's lap and be done with it.

Yet, if that was truly the case, why did he feel so miserable about it?

Crokus left Mammot's library and returned to the outer room. Moby chirped and stuck out its red tongue at him from Mammot's desk. Ignoring the creature, Crokus stood before Apsalar, who'd seated herself in the better of the two chairs – his chair, of course. 'I don't understand. From the looks of it, he's been gone for a couple of days at least.'

'So? Is that so unusual?' Apsalar asked casually.

'It is,' he grumbled. 'Did you feed Moby as I asked?'

She nodded. 'The grapes?'

'Yes.' He placed his hands on his hips. 'Strange. Maybe Rallick knows something about it.'

'Who's Rallick?'

'An assassin friend,' Crokus replied distractedly.

Apsalar shot to her feet, her eyes wide.

'What's wrong?' Crokus asked, stepping close. The girl looked positively terrified. He glared around, half expecting to see some demon rise out of the floor or the cupboard, but the room was unchanged – a little messier than usual, though. Moby's fault, he assumed.

'I'm not sure,' she said, relaxing with an effort. 'It was as if I was about to remember something. But it never came.'

'Oh,' Crokus said. 'Well, we could—'

A knock sounded on the door.

Crokus brightened, walking over to it. 'Oh, he probably lost his keys or something,' he said.

'It was unlocked,' Apsalar pointed out.

Crokus opened the door. 'Meese! What're you—?'

'Quiet!' the big woman hissed, pushing past him and shutting the door. Her gaze fell on Apsalar and her eyes widened. Then she turned back to Crokus. 'Good I found you, lad! You've seen no one since getting back?'

'Why, no. That's just it—'

'A stabler,' Apsalar said, frowning up at Meese. 'Have we met?'

'She's lost her memory,' Crokus explained. 'But, yes, we stabled Coil's horse.'

'Why?' Meese demanded, then as Crokus was about to elaborate she went on, 'Never mind. The stabler shouldn't prove a problem. Well, we're in luck!'

'Dammit, Meese,' Crokus said. 'What's going on?'

She met his eyes. 'That D'Arle guard you killed the other night. The one in the garden. They've got your name and description, lad. Don't ask me how. But the D'Arles are talking high gallows when you're caught.'

The blood left Crokus's face. Then his head jerked to Apsalar. He opened his mouth, then shut it again. No, she truly didn't remember. But it must have been her. He collapsed into Mammot's chair.

'We've got to hide you, lad,' Meese said. 'Both of you, I guess. But don't you worry, Crokus, me and Irilta, we'll take care of you till something can be worked out.'

'I don't believe this,' he whispered, staring at the wall opposite him. 'She betrayed me, damn her!'

Meese looked questioningly at Apsalar, who said, 'It's a guess, but I'd say a girl named Challice.'

Meese closed her eyes briefly. 'Challice D'Arle, the court's honey these days.' Compassion softened her face as she looked down on Crokus. 'Oh, lad. That's the way of it, then.'

He jerked in the seat and glared up at her. 'It isn't any more.'

Meese grinned. 'Right. For now,' she said, arms folded over her chest, 'we just sit tight till night, then it's the rooftops for us. Don't worry, we'll handle things, lad.'

Apsalar rose. 'My name's Apsalar,' she said. 'Pleased to meet you, Meese. And thank you for helping Crokus.'

'Apsalar, huh? Well,' her grin broadened, 'guess the rooftops will be no problem for you, then.'

'None,' she replied, knowing somehow that she was right in this.

'Good enough,' Meese said. 'Now, how about we find something to drink?'

'Meese,' Crokus asked, 'do you know where my uncle might have gone?'

'Can't help you there, lad. No idea.'

She wasn't sure about the old woman on the steps, but the one immediately below, tucked into a shadowed niche and steadily watching the tenement building – that one would have to be taken care of. It seemed that this Coin Bearer had protection.

Serrat was not unduly concerned. Next to her lord, Anomander Rake, she ranked the deadliest among the Tiste Andii of Moon's Spawn. Finding this boy-servant of Oponn's had not proved difficult. Once her lord had given her the necessary details, Oponn's magical signature had been easy to find. It helped that she'd encountered it before – and from this very boy – on the rooftops two weeks past. Her agents had chased the Coin Bearer that night, abandoning him once he'd entered the Phoenix Inn – but only at her command. If she'd suspected then what she now knew, Oponn's presence would have ended that very night.

Ill luck, Serrat smiled to herself, taking a more comfortable position on the rooftop. They'd move at night, she suspected. As for the woman hiding below, she'd have to be removed. Indeed, with a spell of blurring and enough in the way of shadows, she might as easily take the woman's place.

There'd be no suspicion from the other woman, then, the one presently inside with the Coin Bearer. Serrat nodded. Yes, that would be how she'd play it.

But for now, she'd wait. Patience ever rewards.

'Well,' Murillio said, as he scanned the crowd, 'they're not here. Which means they're with Mammot.'

Kruppe drew a deep breath of the sweaty, smoky air. 'Ah, civilization. Kruppe believes your assessment is accurate, friend. If so, then we might as

well rest here, drinking and supping for an hour or two.' With that, he strode into the Phoenix Inn.

A few old hands, seated at Kruppe's table, gathered their tankards and pitcher and left, murmuring apologies and grinning among themselves. Kruppe gave them a gracious nod and settled with a loud sigh into his usual chair. Murillio paused at the bar and spoke with Scurve, then he joined Kruppe.

Brushing dust from his shirt, Murillio frowned distractedly at his road-weary condition. 'I look forward to a bath,' he said. 'Apparently Scurve saw Rallick in here earlier, talking with some stranger. Since then, nobody's seen him.'

Kruppe waved an uninterested hand. 'Kind Sulty arrives,' he announced. A moment later a pitcher of ale stood on the table. Kruppe wiped his tankard with his silk handkerchief, then filled it with the foaming brew.

'Weren't we supposed to report to Baruk?' Murillio asked, his eyes on his friend.

'All in due time,' Kruppe said. 'First, we must recover from our ordeals. What if Kruppe were to lose his voice in very mid-sentence of said report? What would avail Baruk of that?' He raised his tankard and drank deep.

Murillio drummed the fingers of one hand restlessly on the table, his eyes constantly scanning the crowd. Then he straightened in his seat. He filled his tankard. 'So now that you know what Rallick and I are up to,' he said, 'what do you plan to do about it?'

Kruppe's eyebrows lifted. 'Kruppe? Why, nothing but good, of course. Timely assistance, and such. No need for blatant fretting, friend Murillio. By all means proceed as planned. Think of wise Kruppe as no more than a kindly chaperon.'

'Hood's Breath,' Murillio groaned, eyes rolling. 'We were doing fine without your help. The best thing you could do for us is stay out of our way. Don't get involved.'

'And abandon my friends to the fates? Nonsense!'

Murillio finished his ale and rose. 'I'm going home,' he said. 'You can make the report to Baruk in a week's time for all I care. And when Rallick finds out you know all about our plans, well, Kruppe, I'd hate to be in your boots.'

Kruppe waved dismissively. 'See Sulty yon? Upon her tray is Kruppe's supper. Rallick Nom's nasty daggers and nastier temper pale to insignificance before such repast as now approaches. Goodnight to you, then, Murillio. Until the morrow.'

Murillio stared down at him, then grumbled, 'Goodnight, Kruppe.'

He left the bar through the kitchen door. As soon as he stepped into the back alley a figure accosted him from across the way. Murillio frowned. 'That you, Rallick?'

'No,' the shadowed figure said. 'Fear me not, Murillio. I have a message to you from the Eel. Call me Circle Breaker.' The man strode closer. 'The message concerns Councilman Turban Orr ...'

Rallick moved from rooftop to rooftop in the darkness. The need for absolute silence slowed his hunt considerably. There'd be no conversation with Ocelot. Rallick expected he'd have but one shot at the man. If he missed his chance, his Clan Leader's sorcery would prove the deciding factor. *Unless* ...

Rallick paused and checked his pouch. Years back, the alchemist Baruk had rewarded him for work well done with a small bag of reddish dust. Baruk had explained its magic-deadening properties, but Rallick resisted placing his trust in the powder. Had its potency survived the years? Was it a match for Ocelot's powers? There was no telling.

He crossed a high rooftop, skirting the edge of a dome. Off to his right and below was the city's eastern wall. The faint glow of Worrytown rose beyond it. The assassin suspected that Ocelot would await Coil's arrival at Worry Gate, hiding within crossbow range. Better to kill the man before he entered the city.

This limited the possibilities considerably. Lines of sight were few, and K'rul Hill was the best of them. Still, Ocelot might well have used sorcery already, and lie hidden from mundane eyes. Rallick might stumble right over him.

He reached the north side of the dome's skirt. Before him rose the K'rul Temple. From the belfry, there'd be a clean shot just as Coll entered the gate. Rallick removed the pouch from his bag. Whatever the dust covered, Baruk had said, would be impervious to magic. More, it had an area effect. The assassin scowled. How much of an area? And did it wear off? Most importantly, Baruk had said – and Rallick remembered this clearly – do not let it touch your skin. Poison? he'd asked. 'No,' the alchemist had replied. 'The powder changes some people. There is no predicting such changes, however. Best not to take the chance, Rallick.'

Sweat trickled down his face. Finding Ocelot was already a slim chance. Coil's death would ruin everything and, more, it would strip from Rallick his last claim ... to what? To *humanity.* The price of failure had become very high. 'Justice,' he hissed angrily. 'It has to mean something. It has to!'

Rallick untied the pouch. He dipped into it and scraped out a handful of the powder. He rubbed it between his fingers. It felt like rust. 'That's it?' he wondered. Maybe it had deteriorated. Shrugging, he began to massage it into his skin, starting with his face. 'What changes?' he muttered. 'I don't feel any changes.'

Reaching under his clothing as much as was possible, Rallick used up the last of the powder. The pouch itself was stained on the inside. He turned it inside out, then stuffed it into his belt. Now, he grimaced, the hunt continues. Somewhere out there an assassin waited, eyes fixed on Jammit's Worry Road. 'I'll find you, Ocelot,' he whispered, his eyes fixed on K'rul's belfry tower. 'And magic or no magic, you won't hear me, you won't even feel my breath on your neck until it's too late. I swear it.'

He began his ascent.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

This blue city
hides under its cloak
a hidden hand
that holds like stone
a blade envenomed
by the eight limbed Paralt –
the sting brings death
in the span of grief
that marks a final breath –
so this hand defies
sorcery's web
and trembles the gossamer strand
of a spider's deadly threat.
This hand beneath
the blue city's cloak
drives home Power's
gentle balance.

The Conspiracy
Blind Gallan(b. 1078)

Sergeant Whiskeyjack strode to the bedside. 'You sure you're up to it?' he asked Kalam.

The assassin, sitting with his back against the wall, glanced up from honing his long knives. 'Not much choice, is there?' He returned to his sharpening.

Whiskeyjack's expression was drawn and haggard from lack of sleep. He looked across the small room to where Quick Ben crouched in a corner. A

fragment of bedroll was clutched in the wizard's hands, and his eyes were closed.

At the table, Fiddler and Hedge had dismantled their massive arbalest. They now sat cleaning and examining each piece. They were looking at a fight ahead of them.

Whiskeyjack shared their conviction. Each hour that passed brought their many hunters that much closer. Of those it was the Tiste Andii he feared the most. His squad was good, but not that good.

By the window was Trotts, leaning against the wall with his burly arms crossed. And against one wall slept Mallet, his snores loud in the room.

The sergeant returned his attention to Kalam. 'It's a long shot, isn't it?'

The assassin nodded. 'No reason for the man to keep showing himself. They got burned the last time.' He shrugged. 'I'll try the inn again. If anything, someone will mark me and the Guild will come. If I can get a word in before they kill me, there's a chance. It's not much ...'

'... but it'll have to do,' Whiskeyjack finished. 'You've got tomorrow. If we draw a blank,' he looked over to Fiddler and Hedge and found their eyes on him, 'we detonate the intersections. Do damage, hurt them.'

The two saboteurs grinned their anticipation.

Quick Ben's loud hiss of frustration brought everyone round. The wizard's eyes had opened. He tossed the torn cloth contemptuously on to the floor. 'No good, Sergeant,' he said. 'Can't find Sorry anywhere.'

Kalam rumbled a curse and thrust his weapons into their scabbards.

'So, what does that mean?' Whiskeyjack asked the wizard.

'Most likely,' Quick Ben said, 'she's dead.' He gestured at the cloth. 'With that, there's no way the Rope could hide from me. Not while still possessing Sorry.'

'Maybe once you told him you'd figured him out,' Fiddler said, 'he tossed in his coins and quit the game.'

Quick Ben made a face. 'The Rope isn't scared of us, Fiddler. Come back to earth. If anything, he'd be coming down on us. Shadowthrone must've told him by now who I am or, rather, who I once was. It's not the Rope's business, but Shadowthrone might insist. Gods don't like being cheated. Especially being cheated twice.' He climbed to his feet and stretched the kinks from his back. He met Whiskeyjack's gaze. 'I don't understand this, Sergeant. I'm stumped.'

'Do we abandon her?' Whiskeyjack asked.

Quick Ben nodded. 'Might as well.' He paused, then stepped forward. 'We were all wishing we were wrong about her,' he said, 'but what Sorry did had nothing to do with being human. And, as far as I'm concerned, I'm glad of that.'

'I'd hate to think,' Kalam said, from the bed, 'that evil was real, that it existed with a face as plain as the next man's. I know, Whiskeyjack, you've got your reasons for wanting it that way.'

Quick Ben moved closer to the sergeant, his gaze softening. 'Keeps you sane every time you order somebody to die,' he said. 'We all know about that, Sergeant. And we'd be the last to suggest there's some other way that maybe you haven't thought of yet.'

'Well, I'm glad to hear it,' Whiskeyjack growled. He surveyed everyone in the room, seeing that Mallet was awake and watching him. 'Anybody else got something to say?'

'I have,' Fiddler said, then ducked at the sergeant's glower. 'Well, you asked, didn't you?'

'Out with it, then.'

Fiddler straightened in his chair and cleared his throat. Hedge poked him in the ribs as he was about to begin. After a menacing scowl, he tried again. 'It's like this, Sergeant. We've seen a hell of a lot of our friends die, right? And maybe we didn't have to give the orders, so maybe you think it's easier for us. But I don't think so. You see, to us those people were living, breathing. They were friends. When they die, it hurts. But you go around

telling yourself that the only way to keep from going mad is to take all that away from them, so you don't have to think about it, so you don't have to feel anything when they die. But, damn, when you take away everybody else's humanity, you take away your own. And that'll drive you mad as sure as anything. It's that hurt we feel that makes us keep going, Sergeant. And maybe we're not getting anywhere, but at least we're not running away from anything.'

There was silence in the room. Then Hedge punched Fiddler in the arm. 'I'll be damned! You got a brain in there, after all. I guess I been wrong about you all these years.'

'Yeah, right,' Fiddler said, rolling his eyes at Mallet, 'and who is it who's burned his hair off so many times he's gotta wear some ugly leather cap all the time, hey?'

Mallet laughed, but the tension remained and everyone's gaze swung back to fix on their sergeant. Slowly, Whiskeyjack studied each man in his squad. He saw the caring in their eyes, the open offer to the friendship he'd spent years suppressing. All that time pushing them away, pushing everyone away, and the stubborn bastards just kept on coming back.

So Sorry hadn't been human. His conviction that all she'd done was within the possibilities of humanity now seemed to rest on uncertain ground. But it did not collapse. He'd seen too much in his life. There'd be no sudden faith in his view of human history, no burgeoning optimism to chase away all the demonic memories of the hells he'd lived through.

Still, there came a time when some denials lost their function, when the world's relentless battering at him made his foolishness obvious even to himself. He was, finally, and after all these years, among friends. That was a hard admission and he realized he was already impatient with it. 'All right,' he growled, 'enough with the flapping lips. We've got work to do. Corporal?'

'Sergeant?' Kalam replied.

'Get yourself ready. You've got the daylight hours to reestablish contact with the Assassins' Guild. Meanwhile, I want everyone else to lay out their

weapons and give them a good cleaning. Repairs to armour. There'll be an inspection, and if I find a single damn thing I don't like, there'll be hell coming down. Understood?'

'We hear ya,' Mallet said, grinning.

Despite their slow pace, Coil's wound had opened half a dozen times since they'd begun the journey. He'd found a way of sitting in his saddle, leaning to one side and taking most of the weight on his uninjured leg, and since this morning the wound had yet to reopen. The awkward position brought pains and cramps to the rest of him, however.

Paran knew a foul mood when he saw one. Though it was clear to both of them that a bond had formed between them, comfortable and unfettered by pretences, they'd exchanged but scant words as the ravages of Coil's wound continued to take its toll.

Coil's entire left leg, from the hip where the sword had done its damage down to the foot, was a uniform sun-darkened brown colour. Clots of drying blood gathered in the joints of his upper leg plates and knee guard. As the thigh swelled, they were forced to slice the leather padding beneath the plate.

Succour had been denied them at the Catlin Bridge garrison, since the lone surgeon stationed there had been sleeping off one of his 'bad nights'. Clean bandages had been donated, though, and it was these – already soaked through – that now covered the wound.

There was little traffic on Jammit's Worry despite the city's walls being within sight. The flood of refugees from the north had since ended, and those who would gather for the Gedderone Festival had already done so.

As they approached the edge of Worrytown, Coll raised himself from the semi-conscious state he'd been in for the last few hours. His face was deathly white. 'Is this Worry Gate?' he asked dully.

'I believe so,' Paran said, since they were on the road sharing that strange name. 'Will we be permitted to pass within?' he asked. 'Will the guards call

for a surgeon?'

Coll shook his head. 'Take me on through. Phoenix Inn. Take me to the Phoenix Inn.' His head sagged again.

'Very well, Coll.' He'd be surprised if the guards permitted it, and he'd need a story to tell them, though Coll had said nothing of how he'd been wounded. 'I hope,' he muttered, 'there's someone in this Phoenix Inn with a healer's touch.' The man looked bad. Paran fixed his gaze on the city's gates. He'd already seen enough to understand why the Empress wanted it so avidly. 'Darujhistan.' He sighed. 'My, but you are a wonder, aren't you?'

Rallick nudged himself another inch upward. His limbs trembled with exhaustion. If not for the morning shadows on this side of the belfry, he'd have been spotted long ago. As it was, he would not remain hidden much longer.

Taking the stairs would have been suicide in the darkness. Ocelot would have set alarms all along the way – the man was no fool at covering the approaches to his position.

If he was up there, Rallick reminded himself. If not, Coll was in trouble. There was no telling if his friend had arrived at the gates yet, and the silence from the top of the belfry could mean anything. He paused to rest and glanced up. Ten feet to go, the most critical ones yet. He was so tired it was all he could do simply to retain the handholds. The silent approach was now beyond him. His only advantage lay in that Ocelot's concentration would be eastward, while he now climbed the west side of the tower.

He drew some deep breaths, then reached for another hand-hold.

Passers-by stopped to watch Paran and Coll move slowly through Worrytown towards the gate. Ignoring them, and the questions they asked, the captain focused his attention on the two guards at the gate itself. They'd spotted him and Coll, and now stood waiting.

Reaching the gate, Paran motioned that they would pass through. One guard nodded while the other walked alongside the captain's horse. 'Your friend needs a surgeon,' he said. 'If you wait just inside we can have one here in five minutes.'

Paran refused the offer. 'We need to find the Phoenix Inn. I'm from the north, never been here before. The man said the Phoenix Inn, so that's where I'm going to take him.'

The guard was dubious. 'Be surprised if he'd make it that far. But if that's what you want, the least we can do is give you an escort.'

As they emerged from the gate's shadow the other guard cried out in surprise.

Paran held his breath as the man stepped close to Coll. 'I know him,' he said. 'He's Coll Jhamin, of House Jhamin. I served under him. What happened?'

'I thought Coll died a few years back,' the other guard said.

'Screw the writs,' his companion snapped. 'I know what I know, Vildron. This is Coll, all right.'

'He wants to go to the Phoenix Inn,' Paran told the man. 'That's the last thing he said to me.'

The man nodded. 'Let's do it right, though.' He turned to the other guard. 'I'll take the grief if there's any, Vildron. Get me the wagon – it's still hitched up from this morning, right?' The guard smiled up at Paran. 'Thanks for getting him here. Some of us in the city still got eyes, and damn what the highbrows whisper. We'll put him in the back of the wagon – less jarring that way.'

Paran relaxed. 'Thanks, soldier.' He looked past the man, eager to see what he could of the city now that the wall was behind him. Immediately before them rose a humped hill, its sides overgrown with weeds and gnarled trees. On its summit squatted a temple of some kind, abandoned long ago, from which a square-sided tower rose, capped by a bronze-tiled roof. As his

eyes reached the belfry's open-sided platform, he saw a flash of movement. He squinted.

Rallick raised his head cautiously over the platform's edge. He almost gasped aloud. The belfry was empty. Then he remembered Ocelot's sorcery. Holding his breath, he strained one last time with leaden arms, drawing himself flat on to the platform. As soon as he moved to gather in his feet, the barren stone of the platform shimmered and he saw Ocelot lying before him, crossbow cocked, taking aim at something below.

Rallick unsheathed his knives and moved all at once. But his exhaustion gave him away, his boots scuffing the stone.

Ocelot spun on to his back, weapon swinging to fix on Rallick. The Clan Leader's face twisted into a mask of rage and fear. He wasted no time with words and immediately released the quarrel set in his crossbow.

Rallick tensed for the impact that he was certain would throw him across the platform and possibly over the edge. A flash of red before his chest blinded him momentarily, but no impact came. Blinking, Rallick looked down. The quarrel had vanished. The truth came to him in an instant. The quarrel had been magic, created by sorcery to fly unimpeded, but Baruk's rusty powder had worked. Even as this thought burst into his head, he propelled himself forward.

Ocelot swore and dropped the crossbow. As he reached for his knife, Rallick landed on him. A loud grunt sounded from the Clan Leader, his eyes squeezing shut in pain.

Rallick drove the dagger in his right hand against Ocelot's chest. The weapon scraped across mail beneath the cloth shirt. Damn, the man had learned something from that other night – and this was Rallick's own precaution, come to defy him now. The blade in his left hand he angled upward, under Ocelot's right arm. The weapon's point cut into flesh, then continued on into the man's armpit.

Rallick saw, inches from his face, the dagger's tip emerge from the cloth covering Ocelot's right shoulder, followed by a bloom of blood. He heard a knife skitter across the flagstones.

Teeth bared, Ocelot snapped his left hand up to the back of Rallick's neck, finding his braid. He gave it a savage yank, twisting Rallick's head around. Then he tried to sink his teeth into Rallick's neck.

Ocelot gasped as Rallick jammed a knee into his crotch. He tightened his hold on the braid again, this time near its knotted end.

Rallick heard the snick of metal and attempted desperately to roll to his right. Wounded as Ocelot's right arm was, it struck his body with enough force to drive the wedged wrist-blade through the chain links and into his chest. A dull fire blossomed from the wound. Ocelot jerked the blade free and, still holding Rallick's braid, drew back for another stab.

Rallick brought up his right arm and, in a single sweeping motion, sliced through his braid. Freed, he pushed himself on to that side, withdrawing the knife in his left hand as he did so. Ocelot slashed wildly at his face, missing by inches.

With all the remaining strength in his left arm, Rallick slammed his knife into Ocelot's stomach. Links snapped and the blade sank to its hilt. The Clan Leader's body doubled up, curling around the embedded weapon. Gasping, Rallick lurched forward and hammered the other dagger into Ocelot's forehead.

Rallick lay unmoving for a time, wondering at the absence of pain. The plan would fall to Murillio now. Coll would be avenged. Murillio could handle it – he had no choice.

Ocelot's body seemed to grow heavier on him despite the blood leaking from it. 'I'd always believed I was this man's match,' he muttered. He pushed himself from the still-twitching body and rolled on to his back in the centre of the platform. He'd hoped to see sky, to look one last time on its bright, depthless blue. Instead, he found himself looking at the underside of the belfry's roof, its ancient stone arch crowded with nesting bats. This

detail fixed itself in his head as he felt the blood stream from his chest. He thought he could see beady eyes glittering down at him.

After seeing no other sign of movement on the belfry, Paran's gaze swung to the avenue on his left. Vildron approached, seated on a wagon drawn by two horses. The guard waiting beside Coil's horse said, 'Give me a hand here, will you? Let's get the old man down.'

Paran dismounted and hurried to help him. He glanced at Coil's face. Though still hunched on the saddle, he was unconscious. How much longer could he last? If that was me, Paran realized, I'd be dead by now. 'After all this,' he growled as they dragged Coll from the saddle, 'you'd damn well better live.'

Groaning, Serrat rolled on to her back. The sun beat down hot against her eyelids as the scattered fragments of her memory gathered. The Tiste Andii had been about to make her move on the woman in the alley below. With that one dead, the Coin Bearer's protectors would number but one. And when they left the tenement block under cover of darkness, they'd walk right into the trap she'd set.

The assassin-mage opened her eyes to a mid-morning sun overhead. Her daggers, which she'd held in her hands as she crouched at the rooftop's edge, now lay on the pebbled surface beside her, neatly placed side by side. A thick, dull ache throbbed in the back of her skull. She probed the wound, wincing, then sat up.

The world spun, then settled. Serrat was bewildered and angry. She'd been blind-sided, and whoever had done it was good, good enough to sneak up on a Tiste Andii assassin-mage. And that was worrying, since they'd yet to meet such a match in Darujhistan, with the exception of those two Claw on the night of the ambush. But if it had been the Claw, she'd be dead now.

Instead, the arrangements looked to have been designed more with embarrassment in mind than anything else. Leaving her here in broad

daylight, weapons beside her, hinted of a subtle and cunning sense of humour. Oponn? Possibly, though gods rarely acted so directly, preferring unwitting agents culled from among the mortal masses.

One certainty rose from the mystery, however, and that was that she'd lost her opportunity to kill the Coin Bearer – at least, for another day. Next time, she vowed, as she climbed to her feet and accessed her Kurald Galain Warren, her secret foes would find her ready for them.

The air around her shimmered with sorcery. When it settled, Serrat was gone.

Motes of dust drifted through the dead, hot air of the Phoenix Inn's attic. The slanting ceiling rose from five feet along the east wall to seven feet along the west wall. Sunlight streamed in from windows at each end of the long and narrow room.

Both Crokus and Apsalar slept, though at opposite ends of the room. Sitting on a crate beside the trap-door, Meese cleaned her nails with a sliver of wood. Leaving Mallet's tenement and making their way across the rooftops to this hiding place had proved an easy task. Too easy, in fact. Irilta reported that no one on the streets had followed them. And the rooftops themselves had been empty of life. It was as if a path free of obstruction had been made for them.

More of the Eel's brilliance at work? Meese grunted softly. Maybe. More likely Meese was putting too much weight on the instinctive unease that travelled like an elusive itch along her spine. Even now she felt hidden eyes upon them, and that, she told herself, glaring around the musty attic, was impossible.

There came a soft knock at the trap-door. The door swung up and Irilta appeared. 'Meese?' she whispered loudly.

'Breathing down your neck,' Meese rumbled, tossing the wood sliver on to the oily floor. 'Tell Scurve this place is a fire waiting to happen.'

Irilta grunted as she pulled herself into the room. She shut the trap-door and wiped the dust from her hands. 'Getting strange downstairs,' she said. 'City wagon rolls up and off comes a guard and some other fellow carrying Coll between them. The old fool's near-dead from a sword cut. They put him in Kruppe's room a floor down. Sulty's run off to find a cutter, but it don't look good. Not good at all.'

Meese squinted in the dusty air, her gaze fixing on Crokus where he still slept. 'What's the other one look like?' she asked.

Irilta grinned. 'Good enough for a roll on the mat, I'd say. Said he found Coll on Jammit's Worry, bleeding all over the place. Coll woke up long enough to tell him to ride here. The guy's downstairs in the bar right now, eating enough for three men.'

Meese grunted. 'Foreigner?'

Irilta strode to the window facing the street. 'Speaks Daru like he was born to it. But he said he'd come down from the north. Pale, Genabaris before that. He's got the soldier about him, I'd say.'

'Any word from the Eel yet?'

'We keep the lad here for now.'

'And the girl?'

'The same.'

Meese sighed loudly. 'Crokus ain't gonna like being cooped up here.'

Irilta glared over at Crokus's sleeping form. *Was* the *lad truly asleep?* 'No choice. Got word that there's a couple of guardsmen waiting at Mammot's place – too late, of course, but they've got damn close.' Irilta rubbed dust from the window and leaned forward. 'Sometimes I swear I see someone, or maybe something. Then I blink and it's gone.'

'Know what you mean.' Bones creaking, Meese pushed herself to her feet. 'I think even the Eel's beginning to sweat.' She chuckled. 'Life's heating up, friend. Rolling times ahead.'

Irilta nodded grimly. 'Roll on, roll on.'

Captain Paran refilled his tankard for the third time. Was this what that Tiste Andii had meant about his luck turning? Since coming to this land he'd found three friends – something wholly unexpected and new to him, precious, in fact. But the Tattersail he knew was dead, and in her place ... a *child.* Toc was dead. And now it looked like Coll would join that list.

He ran a finger through a pool of spilled beer on the table, creating a river leading to a crack between two planks, then watched as the beer drained down and out of sight. He felt a spreading wetness on his right shin but ignored it as his eyes focused on the crack. The wood had been bolted down, joining the thick planks to an equally robust frame of legs.

What had Rake said? Paran rose and unclipped his sword belt. He laid it on the table, then withdrew Chance.

The few regulars in the bar fell silent and turned to watch him. Behind the counter, Scurve reached for his club.

The captain noticed none of this. With the sword in his right hand, he set the point into the crack and brought the weapon vertical. Working it back and forth, he managed to drive it close to half its length between the planks. Then he sat down again and reached for his beer.

Everyone relaxed, and spoke among themselves in shared confusion.

Paran swallowed a mouthful of beer, frowning at Chance. What had Rake said? When your luck turns, break the sword. Or give it to your worst enemy. He doubted Oponn would accept it, however. And that meant breaking it. The sword had been with him for a long time. He'd used it in battle only once, and that had been against the Hound.

Faintly, he heard the words of one of his childhood tutors. The man's lined face rose into his thoughts to accompany the voice. 'Those whom the gods choose, 'tis said, they first separate from other mortals – by treachery, by stripping from you your spirit's lifeblood. The gods will take all your loved ones, one by one, to their death. And, as you harden, as you become what

they seek, the gods smile and nod. Each company you shun brings you closer to them. 'Tis the shaping of a tool, son, the prod and pull, and the final succour they offer you is to end your loneliness – the very isolation they helped you create.' *Never get noticed, boy.*

Had the shaping begun? Paran scowled. Was he responsible for taking Coil's life? The mere brush of friendship between them – enough to seal the man's doom? 'Oponn,' he whispered, 'you've a lot to answer for, and answer for it you shall.'

He set down the tankard and rose. Then he reached for the sword.

Climbing the steps of the Phoenix Inn, Kalam paused. Damn, there it was again, this feeling that unseen eyes were fixed on him. The sensation, born of his Claw training, had struck him four times in quick succession since he'd come within sight of this bar. Heeding such warnings was what kept him alive, and yet he felt no malice in that unwanted attention – rather, it had the feel of amused curiosity, as if whoever watched him knew full well who and what he was, yet seemed unconcerned.

He shook himself, then entered the bar. As soon as he took his first step into the heavy, stagnant atmosphere, Kalam knew that something was wrong. He shut the door behind him, waited for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. He heard breathing, the light scuff of furniture and clank of tankards coming to rest on tabletops. So, there were people here. Then why the silence?

As the grey confines of the bar grew defined, he saw that its denizens had turned their backs to him and were watching a man standing behind his table at the far end of the room. The lantern light reflected dully from a sword thrust through the table, and the man had closed one hand around its grip. He seemed oblivious to every one else in the bar.

Kalam took a half-dozen steps, coming to the near end of the counter. His dark eyes remained on the man with the sword, and a frown deepened the lines on his broad, flat forehead. The assassin stopped. Was it a trick of this damn light? he wondered. 'No,' he said, startling the innkeeper behind the

counter, 'it isn't.' He pushed himself back from the counter, ran his eyes over the others in the chamber – all locals. He'd have to take the risk.

A band of tension tightened around Kalam's neck and shoulders as he strode directly for the man, who looked to be but moments away from snapping his sword's blade. The assassin plucked an empty chair from a table in his path and slammed it down one-handed opposite the man. Startled eyes fixed on Kalam.

'Your god-given luck's holding, Captain,' the assassin rumbled, in low, close tones. 'Sit down.'

His expression confused and frightened, Paran released his grip on the weapon and sank back into his seat.

Kalam followed suit and leaned forward over the table. 'What's all this drama anyway?' he asked, in a whisper.

The captain frowned. 'Who are you?'

Behind them conversations resumed, loud with rattled nerves.

'Ain't you guessed?' Kalam wagged his head. 'Corporal Kalam, Ninth Squad, Bridgeburners. The last time I saw you, you was recovering from two fatal knife wounds—'

Paran's hands shot out and gripped Kalam's shirt. The assassin was too surprised to react, and the captain's words confused him all the more. 'Is your squad's healer still alive, Corporal?'

'What? Alive? Yeah, sure, why not? What's—?'

'Shut up,' Paran snapped. 'Just listen, soldier. Bring him here. Now! No questions. I'm giving you a direct order, Corporal.' He released his grip on the assassin's shirt. 'Now, move!'

Kalam almost saluted, but caught himself in time. 'As you command, sir,' he whispered.

Paran glared at the corporal's back until the man disappeared through the front door. Then he surged to his feet. 'Innkeeper!' he called, stepping around the table. 'The black man will be showing up in a few minutes with company. Send them up to Coil's room on the double. Understood?'

Scurve nodded.

Paran strode to the stairs. As he reached them he glanced back at the sword. 'And nobody touch that sword,' he ordered, swinging a glare across everyone in the room. Nobody seemed inclined to challenge him. With a sharp, satisfied nod, the captain ascended the stairs.

On the first floor, he strode down the hallway to the last room on the right. He entered without knocking to find Sulty and a local surgeon sitting at the room's lone table. Coil's blanket-covered form lay unmoving on the bed.

The surgeon rose. 'It's no good,' he said, in a thin, reedy voice. 'The infection's too far along.'

Paran asked, 'Is he still breathing?'

'Aye,' the surgeon replied. 'But it won't be for much longer. If the wound had been further down on his leg, I might have been able to cut it off. Even then, I'm afraid the poison's spread through all of him. I'm sorry, sir.'

'Leave,' Paran snapped.

The surgeon bowed and prepared to depart.

'What do I owe you for the services?' the captain asked, remembering.

The surgeon frowned over at Sulty. 'Why, nothing, sir. I failed.' He left the room, shutting the door behind him.

Sulty joined the captain at the bedside. She wiped her face as she looked down on Coll, but said nothing. A few minutes later she, too, left the room, unable to remain any longer.

Paran found a stool and pulled it over to the bed. He sat and leaned his forearms on his knees. He was not sure how long he sat there, staring down

at the straw-littered floor, but the door slamming open behind him brought him to his feet.

A bearded man stood in the doorway, his slate-grey eyes hard and cold.

'Are you Mallet?' Paran demanded.

The man shook his head and strode inside. Behind him appeared Kalam and another man. The latter's gaze found Coll, and he walked quickly to the bed.

'I'm Sergeant Whiskeyjack,' the bearded man said quietly. 'Pardon my directness, sir, but what the hell are you doing here?'

Ignoring the question, Paran joined the healer. Mallet laid a hand over the crusted bandages. He glared up at the captain. 'Can't you smell the rot? He's gone.' Mallet frowned and leaned forward. 'No, wait ... Damn, I don't believe it.' The healer took a spoon-shaped blade from his pouch and removed the bandages. Then he began to dig into the wound with the blade. 'Shedenul's Mercy, someone's stuffed this with herbs!' He drove his fingers into the wound.

Coll jerked and moaned.

Mallet grinned. 'Hah, that got you going, did it? Good.' He probed deeper. 'This cut's half-way through the bone,' he breathed in amazement. 'Those damn herbs have poisoned his marrow. Who the hell treated this?' he asked, looking accusingly at Paran.

'I don't know,' Paran said.

'All right,' Mallet said, removing his hand and wiping it on the blankets. 'Move back, everybody. Give me some room. A minute later, Captain, and this man would've been striding through Hood's Gate.' He pressed his hand down on Coil's chest and closed his eyes. 'And be glad I'm as good as I am.'

'Now, Captain?'

Paran walked over to the table and motioned for the sergeant to join him. 'First, has Adjunct Lorn contacted you yet?'

Whiskeyjack's blank look was sufficient answer.

'Good, I'm in time, then.' Paran glanced up at Kalam, who had stationed himself behind the sergeant. 'You've been set up. The plan was to take the city, yes, but also to make certain you were all killed in the process.'

Whiskeyjack held up a hand. 'A moment, sir. You and Tattersail worked this out?'

Paran closed his eyes briefly. 'She's ... dead. Chasing Hairlock out on the Rhivi Plain. Tayschrenn got to her. It was also her intent to find you and tell you all that I'm telling you. I'm afraid I won't be her equal as your ally once the Adjunct shows up, but at least I can prepare you somewhat.'

Kalam spoke. 'I don't like the idea of Oponn's pawn supposedly helping us.'

Paran nodded. 'I have it on good authority that I'm not Oponn's. That sword downstairs is, though. Your squad wizard should be able to confirm this.'

'The Adjunct's plan,' Whiskeyjack reminded him, the fingers of one hand tapping slowly on the tabletop.

'She'll have no trouble finding you. She has a talent in that area. But I fear she's not the major threat. There's a T'lan Imass with her. Maybe her mission is simply to lead him to you, then he'll handle the rest.'

Kalam cursed and began pacing behind the sergeant's chair.

Whiskeyjack reached a decision. 'The satchel, Corporal.'

The assassin frowned, then picked up the sergeant's standard-issue supply satchel left beside the door. He returned and set it down on the tabletop.

Whiskeyjack released the straps and pulled out an object wrapped in burgundy silk. He removed the cloth, revealing twin yellowed bones of a human forearm. The elbow-end's ball joints were bound together with verdigrised copper wire; the wrist ends were wrapped as well, but as a misshapen knife grip, beyond which jutted a serrated blade.

'What is it?' the captain asked. 'I've never seen its like before.'

'Be surprised if you had,' Whiskeyjack said. 'Back in the days of the Emperor, the inner ring of military commanders each possessed one of these, the booty of a looted K'Chain Che'Malle tomb.' He grasped the bones with both hands. 'It was the source of much of our success, Captain.' He rose and drove the point into the table.

A flash of white light erupted from the bones, then contracted to a swirl spinning thread-like between them. Paran heard a voice he knew.

'I was getting worried, Whiskeyjack,' High Fist Dujek growled.

'Unavoidable,' the sergeant replied, frowning at Paran. 'We've had little to report... until now. But I need to know the situation in Pale, High Fist.'

'You want an update before you spill the bad news, eh? Fair enough,' Dujek said. 'Tayschrenn's stumbling in circles. He was last happy when Bellurdan was killed along with Tattersail. Two more of the Old Guard gone in one fell swoop. Since then, all he's got is questions. What game is Oponn playing? Was there truly a clash between the Knight of Darkness and Shadowthrone? Did a soul-shifted puppet kidnap, torture then murder a Claw officer in Nathilog and what truths were revealed by the poor man?'

'We were not aware that Hairlock had done that, High Fist.'

'I believe you, Whiskeyjack. In any case, enough of the Empress's plans *have* been discovered and, indeed, she seems convinced that the dismantling of my army will pull me back under her wing, in time to saddle me with the command of the Seven Cities' garrisons and put a bloody stop to the rebellion that's brewing. She seriously miscalculated there – if only she'd paid attention to Toc the Younger's reports. Well ... Laseen's intentions now seem to be riding on Adjunct Lorn and Onos T'oolan. They've reached the Jaghut barrow, Whiskeyjack.'

Mallet joined them and met Kalam's stunned gaze. Clearly, even they'd had no idea that their sergeant was so well informed. Suspicion dawned in the assassin's eyes, and Paran nodded to himself. It was happening, after all.

Dujek continued, 'The Moranth Black are ready to march, but it's only for show, and to get them out of the city. So, what are we looking at, friend? The balance of the world is with you, in Darujhistan. If Lorn and Onos T'oolan succeed in unleashing the Tyrant on the city, you can be certain that you and your squad are intended to be on the casualty list. Closer to home, here's what you want: we're ready to move. Tayschrenn himself will trigger events when he announces the disbanding of the Bridgeburners – the blind idiot. Now, I'm waiting.'

'High Fist,' Whiskeyjack began, 'Captain Paran's made it. He's sitting across from me right now. His story is that Oponn's working through his sword, not him.' He met the captain's eyes. 'I believe him.'

Dujek spoke. 'Captain?'

'Yes, High Fist?'

'Was Toc any help?'

Paran winced. 'He gave his life for this, High Fist. The puppet Hairlock ambushed us, tossed Toc into a – a rent or something.'

There was silence, then Dujek said, his voice hoarse, 'I'm sorry to hear that, Captain. More than you know. His father ... Well, enough of that. Go on, Whiskeyjack.'

'No success yet in contacting the local Assassins' Guild, High Fist. We've mined the intersections, though. I'll be explaining everything to my men tonight. The question remains what to do about Captain Paran.'

'Understood,' Dujek replied. 'Captain Paran?'

'Sir?'

'Have you come to any conclusions?'

Paran glanced at Whiskeyjack. 'Yes, sir. I think so.'

'So? What choice will you make, Captain?'

He ran a hand through his hair and leaned back in the chair. 'High Fist,' he said slowly, 'Tayschrenn killed Tattersail.' *And failed, but that is a secret 1*

will keep to myself. 'The Adjunct's plan included betraying her word to me, and probably killing me in the process. But, I admit, that's secondary to what Tayschrenn did.' Looking up, he met Whiskeyjack's steady gaze. 'Tattersail took care of me, and I her after that Hound. It ...' he hesitated '... it meant something, High Fist.' He straightened. 'So, I gather you intend to defy the Empress. But what then? Do we challenge the Empire's hundred legions with ten thousand men? Do we proclaim an independent kingdom and wait for Laseen to make an example of us? I need more details, High Fist, before I decide whether I join you. Because, sir, I want vengeance.'

Dujek responded, 'The Empress loses Genabackis, Captain. We've got the support for that. By the time the Malazan Marines arrive to reinforce the campaign, it'll already be over. The Crimson Guard won't even let them disembark. Expect Nathilog to rise up and Genabaris to follow. The Moranth alliance is about to lose its punch – though I'm afraid I can't give you the details on that.

'My plans, Captain? They might not make sense, because I don't have time to explain. But we're readying ourselves to take on a new player in the game – someone completely outside all of this, and that someone is damn nasty. He is called the Pannion Seer, who even now prepares his armies for a holy war. You want vengeance? Leave Tayschrenn to enemies closer to home. As for Lorn, she's all yours, if you can manage it. I can't offer you anything more, Captain. You can say no. Nobody will kill you for that.'

Paran stared at his hands. 'I want to know when High Mage Tayschrenn gets what he deserves.'

'Agreed.'

'Very well, High Fist. As far as this present situation is concerned, however, I'd rather Sergeant Whiskeyjack remained in command.'

Dujek asked, a grin in his voice, 'Whiskeyjack?'

'Accepted,' the sergeant answered. He smiled at Paran. 'Welcome aboard, Captain.'

'Enough?' Dujek asked.

'We'll speak again after it's all done,' Whiskeyjack said. 'Until then, High Fist, success.'

'Success, Whiskeyjack.'

The threads of light faded. As soon as they were gone Kalam rounded on his sergeant. 'You old bastard! Fiddler told me Dujek wouldn't hear any talk of revolt! Not only that, the High Fist told you to walk after this mission!'

Whiskeyjack shrugged, removing the strange contraption from the table. 'Things change, Corporal. When Dujek got the Adjunct's word on next year's reinforcements, it became obvious that someone was ensuring that the Genabackan Campaign would end in disaster. Now, even Dujek won't tolerate that. Obviously, plans would have to be revised.' He faced Paran, his eyes hardening. 'I'm sorry, Captain, but Lorn has to live.'

'But the High Fist—'

Whiskeyjack shook his head. 'She's on her way into the city, assuming that she and the Imass succeed in freeing the Jaghut. The Tyrant will need a reason to come to Darujhistan, and we can only assume that, somehow, Lorn will be that reason. She will find us, Captain. Once that happens, we'll decide what's to be done with her, depending on what she tells us. If you challenge her openly, she will kill you. If necessary, she *will* have to die, but her demise will be subtle. Do you have problems with any of this?'

Paran released a long breath. 'Can you at least explain why you went ahead and mined the city?'

'In a moment,' Whiskeyjack said, rising. 'First,' he said, 'who's the wounded man?'

'Not wounded any more,' Mallet said, grinning at Paran. 'Just sleeping.'

Paran also rose. 'In that case, I'll also explain everything. Just let me go downstairs and retrieve my sword.' At the door he paused and turned to Whiskeyjack. 'One more thing. Where's your recruit, Sorry?'

Kalam answered, 'Missing. We know what she is, Captain. Do you?'

'Yes.' But *she may not be what she once was, assuming Shadowthrone didn't lie.* He thought to relate that part of his story, then dismissed the notion. He couldn't be sure, after all. Better to wait and see.

The burial chamber proved to be a small, nondescript beehive tomb, the low dome constructed of roughly dressed stones. The passageway leading to it was narrow and less than four feet high, sloping slightly downwards. The chamber's floor was of packed earth and in its centre rose a circular wall of stones, capped by a single, massive lintel stone. Frost-crusted objects lay on this flat surface.

Tool swung to the Adjunct. 'The object you seek is called a Finnest. Within it is stored the Jaghut Tyrant's powers. It is perhaps best described as a self-contained Omtose Phellack Warren. He will discover it is missing once fully awakened, and will unerringly hunt it down.'

Lorn blew on her numb hands, then slowly approached the lintel stone. 'And while it's in my possession?' she asked.

'Your Otataral sword will deaden its aura. Not completely. The Finnest should not remain in your hands for long, Adjunct.'

She scanned the objects scattered on the stone surface. The Imass joined her. Lorn picked up a scabbarded knife, then discarded it. In this Tool could not help her. She had to rely upon her own senses, honed by the strange, unpredictable effects of the Otataral. A mirror set in an antler caught her eye. The mica surface was latticed in a web of frost, yet it seemed to glimmer with a light of its own. She reached for it, then hesitated. Beside it, almost lost among the crystalline frost, was a small, round object. It lay upon a flap of hide. Lorn frowned, then picked it up.

As its ice coating melted, she saw that it was not perfectly round. She polished the blackened surface and studied it closely.

'I believe it is an acorn,' Tool said.

Lorn nodded. 'And it's the Finnest.' Her gaze fell to the capped mound of rocks. 'What an odd choice.'

The Imass shrugged in a clatter of bones. 'The Jaghut are odd people.'

'Tool, they weren't very war-like, were they? I mean, before your kind sought to destroy them.'

The Imass was slow to reply. 'Even then,' he said at last. 'The key lay in making them angry, for then they destroyed indiscriminately, including their own.'

Lorn shut her eyes briefly. She pocketed the Finnest. 'Let's get out of here.'

'Yes, Adjunct. Even now the Jaghut Tyrant stirs.'

CHAPTER NINETEEN

But someone died here
alas. Who drinks
of this now and then
and stirs the ashes
of thine own pyre?
Maker of Paths, you
were never so thirsty
in youth ...

Old Temple
Sivyn Stor (b.1022)

'This isn't right, Meese,' Crokus said, as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. 'We can't just hide in here for ever.'

Apsalar said, from the window, 'It's almost dark.'

Meese crouched once again to check the trap-door's lock. 'We're moving you again, after the twelfth bell. Irilta's down below, getting details.'

'Who's giving these orders?' Crokus demanded. 'Have you found Uncle Mammot yet?'

'Relax, lad.' Meese straightened. 'No, we ain't found your uncle. And the orders come from your protectors. I won't answer any questions about who they are, Crokus, so save your breath.'

Apsalar shifted position by the window to take in Meese. 'Your friend's been a long time,' she said. 'Do you think something's happened?'

Meese looked away. This girl was sharp. Of course, Meese had known that the first time they'd met, and old Chert had found out the hard way. 'Not sure,' she admitted. She bent to unlock the trap-door. 'You both stay

put,' she ordered, glaring at Crokus. 'I ain't going to be happy if you do something stupid. Understand?'

The boy looked glum, his arms crossed. He watched as Meese opened the trap-door and climbed down the ladder.

'Close this up after me,' she said, from below, 'and lock it. Wait to hear from either me or Irilta, got it?'

'Yes.' Crokus strode to the square hole in the floor and stared down at Meese. 'We got it,' he said, grasping the door and swinging it shut. Then he locked it.

'Crokus,' Apsalar asked, 'why did you kill a guard?'

This was their first time alone since entering the city. Crokus glanced away. 'It was an accident. I don't want to talk about it.' He crossed the room to the back window. 'All these people trying to protect me,' he said. 'Makes me uneasy. There's more going on than just an order for my arrest. Hood's Breath, the Thieves' Guild takes care of such things, that's why they get ten per cent of every job I do. No, none of it makes sense, Apsalar. And,' he said, as he unlatched the window, 'I'm sick of everybody telling me what to do.'

She came to his side. 'Are we leaving, then?'

'Damn right. It's already dusk so we'll take the rooftops.' He pulled and the window swung inward.

'Where?'

Crokus grinned. 'I've got a great hiding-place in mind. Nobody will find us, not even my protectors. Once there, I can do what I want.'

Apsalar's brown eyes searched his face. 'What do you want to do?' she asked softly.

He looked away, concentrating on propping up the window. 'I want to talk to Challice D'Arle,' he said. 'Face to face.'

'She betrayed you, didn't she?'

'Never mind that. Are you staying here?'

'No,' she said, surprised. 'I'm coming with you, Crokus.'

The power of her Warren bristled on her body. Serrat scanned the area one more time, still seeing and sensing nothing. She was certain she was alone. The Tiste Andii tensed as the window in the attic beneath her creaked inward on rusty hinges. Knowing herself to be invisible, she leaned forward.

The lad's head popped out. He glanced at the alley below, the opposite rooftops and those to either side, then he looked up. His gaze passed right through Serrat, and she smiled.

It hadn't taken long to find him again. His only company, she could sense, was a young woman whose aura was harmless, astonishingly innocent. The other two women no longer occupied the attic. Excellent. It would be that much easier. She stepped back as the Coin Bearer climbed through the window.

A moment later he scrambled on to the sloping rooftop.

Serrat decided that she would waste no time. Even as the Coin Bearer pushed himself to his feet, she sprang forward.

Her charge met an invisible hand, driving into her chest with bone-jarring force. It pushed her back through the air, giving a final shove that sent her cartwheeling beyond the roof's edge. Her spells of invisibility and flight remained with her, even when she rebounded off a brick chimney, dazed and drifting.

Apsalar appeared on the roof's edge. Crokus crouched before her, daggers in hand and glaring all around him. 'What's wrong?' she whispered, frightened.

Slowly, Crokus relaxed and turned a rueful grin her way. 'Just nerves,' he said. 'Thought I saw something, felt a wind. Looked like ... Well, never

mind.' He looked around again. 'There's nothing here. Come on, then.'

'Where's this new hiding-place of yours?' Aspalar asked, as she gained the rooftop.

He faced east and pointed to the shadowed hills rising on the other side of the wall. 'Up there,' he said. 'Right under their very noses.'

Murillio clasped on his sword-belt. The longer he waited for Rallick to arrive the more certain he was that Ocelot had killed his friend. The only question that remained was whether Coll still lived. Maybe Rallick had done enough, wounded Ocelot sufficiently to prevent the Clan Master from completing the contract. I *can hope*, *anyway.*

They'd know at the Phoenix Inn, and each minute that passed made his Spartan room seem smaller, more cramped. If Coll lived, Murillio vowed to attempt Rallick's role in the plan. He checked his rapier. It'd been years since his last duel, and Turban Orr was said to be the city's best. His chances looked poor.

He collected his cape and fastened the collar around his neck. And who was this Circle Breaker with all the devastating news? How did this Eel justify involving himself or herself in their schemes? Murillio's eyes narrowed. Was it possible? That little round runt of a man?

He pulled on his doeskin gloves, muttering under his breath.

A scrape at the door caught his attention. A heavy sigh of relief escaped him. 'Rallick, you old bastard,' he said, as he opened the door. For an instant he thought the hallway empty, then his gaze fell to the floor. The assassin lay there, his clothing soaked through with blood, looking up at him with a weak grin.

'Sorry I'm late,' he said. 'My legs keep giving out.'

Cursing, Murillio helped Rallick into the room and on to the bed. He returned to the door, checked the hallway, then shut and set the lock.

Rallick pushed himself upright against the headboard. 'On-offered a contract on Coll—'

'I know, I know,' Murillio said, as he approached. He knelt beside the bed. 'Let's see to your wound.'

'I need to take off my armour first,' Rallick said. 'Ocelot stuck me one. Then I killed him. Coil's still alive as far as I know. What day is this?'

'The same day,' Murillio said, as he helped his friend remove his mail hauberk. 'We're still on schedule, though from all this blood it looks like you won't be duelling Orr at Simtal's Fete. I'll handle that.'

'Stupid idea.' Rallick groaned. 'You'll just get killed and Turban Orr will walk away, still Lady Simtal's backer and still powerful enough to prevent Coil's claim to rights.'

Murillio made no reply to that. He peeled back the leather padding to expose the wound. 'What's with all this blood on you?' he demanded. 'There's nothing here but a week-old scar.'

'Huh?' Rallick probed the place where Ocelot's wrist-blade had stabbed him. It felt mildly tender, itchy at the edges. 'I'll be damned,' he muttered. 'Anyway, get me a washcloth, so I can clean all this rust off.'

Murillio sat back on his haunches, clearly confused. 'What rust?'

'The stuff on my face,' Rallick said, scowling at his friend.

Murillio leaned close.

'Baruk's magic-deadening powder!' the assassin snapped. 'How the hell do you think I managed to kill Ocelot?'

'Your face is clean, Rallick,' Murillio said. 'You're welcome to the washcloth. We'll get all that dried blood off you in any case.'

'Give me a mirror first,' Rallick said.

Murillio found one and stood watching Rallick study his own pallid reflection, which bore a deep frown. He observed drily, 'Well, that expression confirms it for me.'

'Confirms what?' the assassin asked, in a dangerous tone.

'That you're you, Rallick.' Murillio squared his shoulders. 'Rest here for a while. You've lost a lot of blood. I'm off to find the Eel and tell him a thing or two.'

'You know who the Eel is?'

He strode to the door. 'I've got a hunch. If you can walk, try locking this door behind me, will you?'

Kruppe mopped his brow with his limp, sodden handkerchief. 'Kruppe has uttered every single detail at least a thousand times, Master Baruk,' he complained. 'Will this ordeal never end? Look at yon window. A whole day in Kruppe's life has passed!'

The alchemist sat frowning down at his slippers, occasionally wiggling his toes, as the minutes passed. It was as if he'd forgotten Kruppe's presence in the room, and it had been this way for the past hour, no matter how much Kruppe talked.

'Master Baruk,' Kruppe tried again, 'may your loyal servant leave? He's not yet recovered from his horrific journey in the eastern wastelands. Simple fare, of roast mutton, potatoes, fried onions and carrots, mussels in garlic butter, dates, cheese, smoked slipper minnows and a carafe of wine, now occupies Kruppe's mind to the exclusion of all else. Such as he has been reduced, his world contracting apace with his stomach—'

Baruk spoke. 'For the past year,' he said slowly, 'an agent of the Eel's, known to me as Circle Breaker, has been providing me with vital information regarding the City Council.'

Kruppe's mouth shut with an audible click.

'It lies within my powers, of course, to identify this Circle Breaker at my leisure. I have a score of missives written in his own hand – the parchment alone suffices.' Baruk's eyes lifted to fix on the mantelpiece. 'I am considering doing so,' he said. 'I must speak with this Eel. We've reached a

critical juncture in the life of Darujhistan, and I must know the Eel's purposes. We could work in close alliance, sharing all we know, and perhaps we can save the life of this city. Perhaps.'

Kruppe cleared his throat and wiped his brow again. He carefully folded the handkerchief on his lap, then stuffed it into a sleeve. 'If you wish to convey such a message,' he said quietly, 'Kruppe can oblige Master Baruk.'

Baruk's gaze dropped calmly to Kruppe. 'Thank you. How soon the reply?'

'By this evening,' Kruppe said.

'Excellent. I admit to resisting my own decision to compromise this Circle Breaker. The means you offer seem the best. You may go now, Kruppe.'

Kruppe's head bobbed. He rose. 'Until tonight, then, Master Baruk.'

Coll slept while the men in the room continued their discussion. Mallet said that the man might well sleep for days, Hood's Gate having been as close as it was.

Paran felt frustrated. Something was missing from Whiskeyjack's explanations. The saboteurs had gone ahead with planting the mines, and even now it was Whiskeyjack's plan to detonate them. More, the efforts to contact the Assassins' Guild remained with the purpose of offering a contract on Darujhistan's true rulers. These facts hardly complemented this idea of a full-scale, continent-wide revolt. If anything, wouldn't Dujek be seeking local alliances?

As the sergeant went on, more and more of what the man said gathered in the captain's mind, and he sensed a pattern emerging. He broke his hour-long silence and addressed Whiskeyjack. 'You still intend to cripple Darujhistan. And I keep thinking about that, and now I think I've worked out why.' He studied Whiskeyjack's blank expression. 'What you seek is to crack this city wide open. Chaos in the streets, a headless government. Everybody who matters shows up and they kill each other. What does that leave?' Paran leaned forward, his eyes hard. 'Dujek's got an army ten

thousand strong, about to become outlaws of the Empire. Maintaining ten thousand soldiers is an expensive business. Housing them is even tougher. Dujek knows Pale's days are numbered. Caladan Brood's on the march down the Rhivi Plain right now. Are the Moranth about to pull out of the alliance? Maybe make a move of their own? Tayschrenn's in Pale – maybe old Onearm can handle him, maybe not. How am I so far, Sergeant?'

Whiskeyjack glanced over at Kalam, then shrugged. 'Go on,' he said to Paran.

'Darujhistan's filled with panic. No one knows anything. In marches Dujek, rebel army at his heels. He'll set things aright. Wealth beyond measure falls into his lap – and he'll need all of it if he's to oppose what the Empress sends after him. So, the city gets conquered after all. Fancy that.' He sat back.

'Not bad,' Whiskeyjack admitted, grinning at the surprise on the faces of Mallet and Kalam. 'With one piece missing. Something,' he eyed Paran, 'that might relieve the captain's sense of betrayal, if not his outrage.'

Paran's smile was cold. 'Surprise me.'

'All right, Captain. We don't give a damn if the Empress wants to come after us. She won't have much to do it with, since Seven Cities is days away from reclaiming its independence. It's coming down, Captain. On all sides. So why do we maintain our army? Look to the south. Something's growing there, so ugly it makes the Imass look like kittens. When I say we're in trouble, I don't mean just Genabackis, I mean the world. We're all in for a fight, Captain. And that's why we need Darujhistan.'

'What's to the south?' Paran asked sceptically.

Kalam answered, his words a breath of fear, 'The Pannion Seer. So the rumours are true, then. The Seer's proclaimed a holy war. The genocide's begun.'

Whiskeyjack got to his feet. 'Explain it to the man,' he said to Kalam. 'That Guild still needs contacting, if possible. Hood knows, we've made a show of ourselves at this bar. Might be what's needed, though.' He looked to

Paran. 'Captain, I don't think Adjunct Lorn should know you're alive, do you?'

'No.'

'Can you stay here until I call for you?'

Paran glanced at Kalam, then nodded.

'Good. Mallet, let's move.'

'We've lost at least two days,' Lorn pronounced, thankful for the day's lingering heat. 'These are thirsty horses.'

Tool stood near the shattered barrow marker, watching the Adjunct ready her horses for the journey into Darujhistan. 'How fares your wound, Adjunct?' he asked.

'Mostly healed,' she replied. 'Otataral has that effect on me.'

'My task is finished,' the Imass said. 'If it becomes your desire to accompany me after you have completed your mission, I will be found here for the next ten days. I wish to observe this Jaghut Tyrant – though it will not see me, nor will I interfere. My thoughts of success are with you, Adjunct.'

Lorn climbed on to her horse and stared down at the Imass. 'Fare well in your search, Onos T'oolan.'

'That name is past. I am now Tool.'

She grinned, then gathered the reins and kicked her mount forward, the packhorse trailing on its lead. Once the Finnest was out of her hands, she would focus her talents on discovering this Coin Bearer. Until now she had not allowed herself to think about Oponn. She had had too many other, more immediate concerns, like Sorry.

A strong sense of regret filled her at the loss of Captain Paran. That man would have made her task much easier, possibly even enjoyable. Though

he'd been a dour man, getting grimmer by the minute, she had to admit that she had been attracted to him. There might have been something there.

'Well,' she sighed, as she urged her horse up a hillside, 'dying's never in anybody's plans.'

Tool's estimation gave her two days at the most. Then the Jaghut would be fully awake, and free of the barrow. The Finnest would have to be securely in place long before then. She looked forward to her meeting with Sorry, and instinctively brushed a hand against her sword's pommel. To kill a servant of Shadow, perhaps the Rope himself. The Empress's pleasure at that would be immense.

She realized that the doubts that had plagued her, borne on those dark wings of knowledge, now lay quiescent. An effect of her time in the barrow? More likely this acorn in her pocket. Or perhaps she'd moved unconsciously beyond them. *When the time for action comes, all doubts must be discarded.* An old Claw tenet. She knew herself well, and she knew how to control all that was within her. Years of training, discipline, loyalty and duty. The virtues of a soldier.

She was ready for the mission, and with this realization the weight on her shoulders vanished. She urged her mount into a gallop.

Crokus craned his head and squinted into the darkness above. 'Right to the top,' he said. 'We can see the whole city from there.'

Apsalar eyed the stairs dubiously. 'It's awfully dark,' she said. 'Are you sure this tower is abandoned? I mean, my father told me stories about ghosts, undead monsters, and they always lived in ruined places.' She looked around with wide eyes. 'Places just like this one.'

Crokus groaned. 'The god K'rul's been dead for thousands of years,' he said. 'Besides, no one ever comes here, so what would all those monsters do with all that spare time? What would they eat? Tell me that! Stupid stories.' He walked to the foot of the spiral staircase. 'Come on, the view's worth it.'

She watched Crokus climb upward and hurried to follow before he disappeared from sight. What at first seemed to be impenetrable darkness slowly faded to grey, and Apsalar was surprised to find herself able to discern even the minutest details. The first things she noticed were the soot-stained paintings on the wall to their left. Each stone panel was as wide as a single step, rising half a dozen feet in a jagged procession that mimicked the stairs. 'Crokus,' she whispered, 'there's a story painted on this wall.'

Crokus snorted. 'Don't be ridiculous! You can't even see your hand in front of your face in here.'

I can't?

He continued, 'Wait till you get up top. Those clouds we saw should have cleared the moon by now.'

'There's something wet on these steps,' Apsalar said.

'Run off from up top,' he explained, exasperated.

'No, it isn't,' she insisted. 'It's thick, and sticky.'

Crokus stopped above her. 'Look, will you be quiet for a minute? We're almost there.'

They emerged on to a platform bathed in the moon's silver glow. Near one of the low walls Crokus saw a heap of cloth. 'What's that?' he wondered. 'Looks like somebody's been camping up here.'

Apsalar stifled a gasp. 'That's a dead man!'

'What?' Crokus hissed. 'Not another one!' He rushed to the huddled figure and crouched beside it. 'Blessed Mowri, somebody's stabbed him in the head.'

'There's a crossbow over here.'

He grunted. 'An assassin. I saw one just like this killed here last week. There's an assassin war going on. Just like I told Kruppe and Murillio.'

'Look at the moon,' Apsalar breathed, from the far side of the platform.

Crokus shivered. She was still a cold one, at times. 'Which one?' he asked, rising.

'The shining one, of course.'

Feeling contrary, Crokus studied Moon's Spawn instead. A faint reddish glow suffused it – something he'd not seen before. A worm of fear squirmed in his stomach. Then his eyes widened. Five massive winged shapes seemed to sweep down the Moon's face, angling north-east. He blinked, and they were gone.

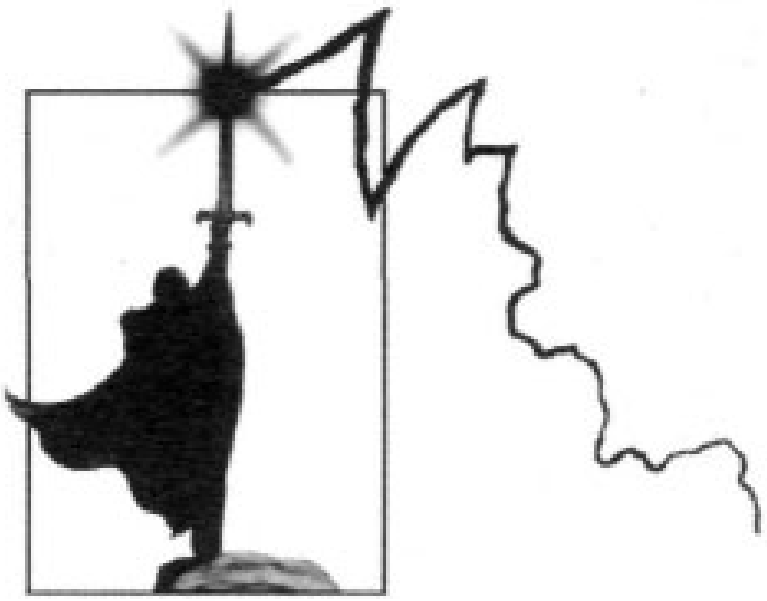
'Do you see its oceans?' Apsalar asked.

'What?' He turned.

'Its oceans. Grallin's Sea. That's the big one. The Lord of the Deep Waters living there is named Grallin. He tends vast, beautiful underwater gardens. Grallin will come down to us, one day, to our world. And he'll gather his chosen and take them to his world. And we'll live in those gardens, warmed by the deep fires, and our children will swim like dolphins, and we'll be happy since there won't be any more wars, and no empires, and no swords and shields. Oh, Crokus, it'll be wonderful, won't it?'

Her profile was in silhouette. He stared at her. 'Of course,' he said quietly. 'Why not?' And then that question repeated itself in his head for an entirely different reason. Why not?

BOOK SEVEN



THE FÊTE

The Flaying of Fander, She-Wolf of Winter, marks the Dawn of Gedderone. The priestesses race down the streets, strips of wolf-fur streaming from their hands. Banners are unfurled. The noises and smells of the market rise into the morning air. Masks are donned, the citizens discard the year's worries and dance across the day into night.

The Lady of Spring is born anew.
It is as if the gods themselves pause their breath ...

Faces *of Darujhistan*
Maskral Jemre (b.110l)

CHAPTER TWENTY

It is said that the matron's
blood like ice brought forth into this
world a birthing of dragons
and this flowing river of fate
brought light into dark and dark into light,
unveiling at last in cold, cold eyes
the children of chaos ...

T'matha's Children
Heboric

Murillio wondered again at Rallick's healed wound. He'd already concluded that whatever magic-deadening powder of Baruk's the assassin had used had been responsible for the healing. Nevertheless, much blood had been lost, and Rallick would need time to recover – time they didn't have. Was the assassin capable of killing Orr now?

In answer to his own question, Murillio laid a hand on the rapier at his side. He strode down the empty street, cleaving the low-lying mists that swirled like incandescent cloaks in the gaslight. Dawn was still two hours away. As was the Daru custom, the new year's celebrations would begin with sunrise, lasting through the day and well into the night.

He walked through a silent city, as if he were the last of the living yet to flee the past year's turmoil, and now shared the world with ghosts tolled among the year's dead. The Five Tusks had slipped behind in the ancient cycle, and taking its place was the Year of the Moon's Tears. Murillio mused on such obscure, arcane titles. A massive stone disc in Majesty Hall marked the Cycle of the Age, naming each year in accordance with its mysterious moving mechanisms.

As a child, he'd thought the wheel magical in how it spun slowly as the year rolled by, coming into the new year aligned precisely with the dawn whether there was cloud in the sky or not. Mammot had since explained to him that the wheel was in fact a machine. It had been a gift to Darujhistan over a thousand years ago, by a man named Icarium. It was Mammot's belief that Icarium had Jaghut blood. By all accounts he'd ridden a Jaghut horse, and a Trell strode at his side – clear evidence, Mammot asserted, to add to the wonder of the wheel itself, for the Jaghut were known to have been skilled at such creations.

Murillio wondered at the significance of the names each year bore. The close association of the Five Tusks with Moon's Tears held prophecy, according to the Seers. The Boar Tennerock's tusks were named Hate, Love, Laughter, War and Tears. Which Tusk would prove dominant in the year? The new year's name provided the answer. Murillio shrugged. He viewed such astrology with a sceptical eye. How could a man of a thousand years ago – Jaghut or otherwise – have predicted such things?

Still, he admitted to more than a few qualms. The arrival of Moon's Spawn threw the new year's title into a different light, and he knew that the local scholars – particularly those who moved in the noble circles – had become an agitated and short-tempered lot. Quite unlike their usual patronizing selves.

Murillio turned a corner on his approach to the Phoenix Inn, and collided with a short, fat man in a red coat. Both grunted, and three large boxes that the man had been carrying fell between them, spilling out their contents.

'Aye, why, Murillio! Such fortune as Kruppe is known for! Thus does your search end, here in this dank, dark street where even the rats shun the shadow. What? Is something the matter, friend Murillio?'

He stared down at the objects on the cobbles at his feet. Slowly, Murillio asked, 'What are these for, Kruppe?'

Kruppe stepped forward and frowned down at the three expertly carved masks. 'Gifts, friend Murillio, of course. For you and Rallick Nom. After all,' he looked up with a beatific smile, 'the Lady Simtal's Fete demands the

finest in workmanship, the subtlest of design perfectly mated with ironic intent. Don't you think Kruppe's taste is sufficiently expensive? Do you fear embarrassment?'

'You'll not distract me this time,' Murillio growled. 'First of all, there are three masks here, not two.'

'Indeed!' Kruppe replied, bending down to pick one up. He brushed spatters of mud from the painted face. 'This is Kruppe's own. Well chosen, Kruppe pronounces with certain aplomb.'

Murillio's eyes hardened. 'You're not coming, Kruppe.'

'Well, of course Kruppe will attend! Do you think Lady Simtal would ever show herself if her long-time acquaintance, Kruppe the First, was not in attendance? Why, she'd wither with shame!'

'Dammit, you've never even met Simtal!'

'Not relevant to Kruppe's argument, friend Murillio. Kruppe has been acquainted with Simtal's existence for many years. Such association is made better, nay, pristine, for the fact that she has not met Kruppe, nor Kruppe her. And, in final argument designed to end all discussion, here,' he pulled from his sleeve a parchment scroll tied in blue silk ribbon, 'Kruppe's invitation, signed by the Lady herself.'

Murillio made a grab for it but Kruppe replaced it deftly in his sleeve.

'Rallick will kill you,' Murillio said levelly.

'Nonsense.' Kruppe placed the mask over his face. 'How will the lad ever recognize Kruppe?'

Murillio studied the man's round body, the faded red waistcoat, gathered cuffs, and the short oily curls atop his head. 'Never mind.' He sighed.

'Excellent,' Kruppe said. 'Now, please accept these two masks, gifts from your friend Kruppe. A trip is saved, and Baruk need not wait any longer for a secret message that must not be mentioned.' He replaced his mask in its box, then spun round to study the eastern skyline. 'Off to yon alchemist's abode, then. Good evening, friend—'

'Wait a minute,' Murillio said, grasping Kruppe's arm and turning him round. 'Have you seen Coll?'

'Why, of course. The man sleeps a deep, recovering sleep from his ordeals. 'Twas healed magically, Sulty said. By some stranger, yet. Coll himself was brought in by yet a second stranger, who found a third stranger, who in turn brought a fifth stranger in the company of the stranger who healed Coll. And so it goes, friend Murillio. Strange doings, indeed. Now, Kruppe must be off. Goodbye, friend—'

'Not yet,' Murillio snarled. He glanced around. The street was still empty. He leaned close. 'I've worked some things out, Kruppe. Circle Breaker contacting me put everything into order in my mind. I know who you are.'

'Aaai!' Kruppe cried, withdrawing. 'I'll not deny it, then! It's true, Murillio, Kruppe is Lady Simtal connivingly disguised.'

'Not this time! No distractions. You're the Eel, Kruppe. All this blubbering, sweaty meek-mouse stuff is just an act, isn't it? You've got half this city in your pocket, Eel.'

Eyes wide, Kruppe snatched the handkerchief from his sleeve and mopped his brow. He wrung sweat from it, droplets spattering on the cobbles, then a veritable torrent splashed on to the stones.

Murillio barked a laugh. 'No more magical cantrips, Kruppe. I've known you a long time, remember? I've seen you cast spells. You've got everybody fooled, but not me. I'm not telling, though. You don't have to worry about that.' He smiled. 'Then again, if you don't come out with it here and now, I might get annoyed.'

Sighing, Kruppe returned the handkerchief to his sleeve. 'Annoyance is uncalled for,' he said, waving a hand and fluttering his fingers.

Murillio blinked, suddenly dizzy. He rubbed his forehead and frowned. What had they just been talking about? It couldn't have been important. 'Thanks for the masks, friend. They'll come in handy, I'm sure.' His frown deepened. What a confusing thing to say! He wasn't even angry that Kruppe had figured things out; nor that the fat little man would attend the Fête.

How odd! 'Good that Coil's all right, isn't it? Well,' he mumbled, 'I'd better head back to check on Rallick.'

Smiling, Kruppe nodded. 'Until the Fête, then, fare you well, Murillio, Kruppe's finest and dearest friend.'

'Goodnight,' Murillio replied, turning to retrace his steps. He lacked sleep. All these late nights were taking their toll. That was the problem. 'Of course,' he muttered, then began to walk.

His features darkening, Baruk studied the Tiste Andii lounging in the chair across from him. 'I don't think it's a very good idea, Rake.'

The Lord raised an eyebrow. 'As I understand such things, the event includes the wearing of disguises,' he said, with a slight smile. 'Do you fear I lack taste?'

'I've no doubt your attire will be suitable,' Baruk snapped. 'Particularly if you choose the costume of a Tiste Andii warlord. It's the Council that worries me. They're not all fools.'

'I would be surprised if they were,' Rake said. 'Indeed, I would have you point out the cunning ones. I don't imagine you will refute my suspicion that there are those within the Council seeking to pave the way for the Empress – for a price, of course. Power comes to mind. Nobles delving in merchant trades no doubt drool at the prospect of Empire trade. Am I far off the mark, Baruk?'

'No,' the alchemist admitted sourly. 'But we have that under control.'

'Ah, yes,' Rake said. 'This brings to mind my other reason for wishing to attend this Lady Simtal's Fête. As you said, the city's power will be there. I assume this includes such mages as are in your T'orrud Cabal?'

'Some will attend,' Baruk conceded. 'But I must tell you, Anomander Rake, your debacles with the Assassins' Guild has made a good number of them rue our alliance. They'll not appreciate your presence in the least.'

Rake's smile returned. 'To the extent that they will reveal their community to cunning Council members? I think not.' He rose in a fluid motion. 'No, I would like to attend this Fête. My own people hold little to such social affairs. There are times when I grow weary of their dour preoccupations.'

Baruk's gaze focused on the Tiste Andii. 'You suspect a convergence, don't you? A fell gathering of powers, like iron filings to a lodestone.'

'With so much power gathered in one place,' Rake admitted, 'it's likely. I'd rather be on hand in such circumstances.' His eyes held Baruk's, their colour flowing from dun green to amber. 'Also, if this event is as publicly known as you suggest, then the Empire's agents within the city will know of it. Should they wish to cut out Darujhistan's heart, they'll have no better opportunity.'

Baruk barely repressed a shiver. 'Extra guards have been hired, of course. If an Empire Claw should strike, they will find their hands full with the T'orrud mages besides.' He thought for a time, then nodded wearily. 'Very well, Rake. Simtal will accept you as my guest. You will wear an effective disguise?'

'Naturally.'

Baruk climbed to his feet and strode to the window. Beyond the sky had begun to pale. 'And so it begins,' he whispered.

Rake joined him. 'What begins?'

'The new year,' the alchemist replied. 'Past is the Five Tusks. The dawn you see marks the birth of the Year of the Moon's Tears.'

Lord Anomander Rake stiffened.

Baruk noticed. 'Indeed. An unusual coincidence, though I would put little weight upon it. The titles were devised over a millennium ago, by a visitor to these lands.'

When Rake spoke his voice was a ravaged whisper. 'Icarium's gifts. I recognize the style. Five Tusks, Moon's Tears – the Wheel is his, correct?'

Eyes wide, Baruk hissed his surprise between his teeth. A dozen questions struggled to be uttered first, but the Lord continued. 'In the future, I'd suggest you heed Icarium's gifts – all of them. A thousand years is not so long a time, Alchemist. Not so long a time. Icarium last visited me eight hundred years ago, in the company of the Trell Mappo, and Osric – or Osserc, as the local worshippers call him.' Rake smiled bitterly. 'Osric and I argued, as I recall, and it was all Brood could do to keep us apart. It was an old argument ...' His almond eyes shaded into grey. He fell silent, lost in memories.

There came a knock at the door and both turned to see Roald enter and bow.

'Master Baruk, Mammot has awakened and appears refreshed. More, your agent Kruppe has delivered a verbal message. He extends his regret that he cannot deliver it to you in person. Do you wish to receive it now?'

'Yes,' Baruk said.

Roald bowed again. 'The Eel will contact you the eve of this day. At Lady Simtal's Fête. The Eel further finds the prospect of shared information and co-operation intriguing. That is all.'

Baruk brightened. 'Excellent.'

'Shall I bring Mammot to you, Master?'

'If he's able.'

'He is. A moment, then.' Roald left.

The alchemist smiled. 'As I said,' he laughed, 'everyone will be there, and in this case, *everyone* is an appropriate term.' His smile broadened at Rake's blank look. 'The Eel, Lord. Darujhistan's master-spy, a figure without a face.'

'A masked face,' the Tiste Andii reminded him.

'If my suspicions are correct,' Baruk said, 'the mask won't help the Eel one bit.'

The door opened again and there stood Mammot, looking fit and full of energy. He nodded to Baruk. 'Withdrawal proved easier than I'd imagined,' he said, without preamble. His bright gaze fixed on Anomander Rake and he smiled, then bowed. 'Greetings, Lord. I've looked forward to this meeting ever since Baruk brought to us the offer of alliance.'

Rake glanced at Baruk and raised an eyebrow.

The alchemist said, 'Mammot numbers among the T'orrud Cabal.' He faced the old man again. 'We were deeply worried, friend, given the Elder mageries at play around the barrow.'

'I was snared for a time,' Mammot admitted, 'but at the extreme edges of the Omtose Phellack influence. Quiescent regard proved the correct course, as the one stirring within did not sense me.'

'How much time do we have?' Baruk asked tightly.

'Two, perhaps three days. Even for a Jaghut Tyrant, it is an effort to make the return journey to life.' Mammot's eyes fell upon the mantelpiece. 'Ah, your carafe of wine awaits as is usual. Excellent.' He strode over to the fireplace. 'Have you word of my nephew, by any chance?'

Baruk frowned. 'No, should I have? The last time I met the child was, what, five years ago?'

'Mmm,' Mammot said, raising his freshly filled goblet and taking a mouthful. 'Well, Crokus has grown somewhat since then, I assure you. I hope the lad's all right. He was—'

Baruk threw up a hand and staggered a step forward. 'What?' he demanded in sudden fear. 'What's his name? Crokus? Crokus!' The alchemist rapped his forehead. 'Oh, what a fool I've been!'

Mammot's face crinkled into a wise smile. 'Oh, you mean the matter of the Coin Bearer, do you?'

Shock registered in Baruk's face. 'You knew?'

Standing to one side, his charcoal-grey eyes fixed intently on Mammot, Rake said, in a strangely flat tone, 'Mammot, forgive me for interrupting.

Will you be attending Lady Simtal's Fête?'

The old man nodded easily. 'Of course.'

'Very good,' Rake said, with something like anticipation. He pulled his leather gloves from his belt. 'We'll speak then.'

Baruk had no time to think about Rake's sudden departure. It was his first mistake of the day.

A woman with a shaved head and long flowing robes ran shrieking from the gates, a shred of brown fur streaming from one hand. Adjunct Lorn stepped back to let the priestess pass. She watched as the woman plunged into the crowd behind her. The festival had spilled out beyond Darujhistan's walls, and Worrytown's main street was a streaming mob she'd spent the last half-hour pushing through on her way to the gates.

Absently she rubbed the rapier wound in her shoulder. Her journey into the barrow seemed to have slowed the healing, and an ache had settled inside the puncture, cold as the ice in the barrow's tunnel. Eyeing the two guards stationed at the gate, she approached warily.

Only one seemed to pay her any attention, and this man spared her but the briefest glance before returning his attention to the Worrytown mob. Lorn entered the city unremarked, simply one more traveller come to attend the spring festival.

Immediately within the gates the avenue split around the base of a squat hill, on which crouched a half-ruined temple and tower. Off to her right rose another hill, evidently a garden, given the wide steps ascending to the summit, covered in trees, and the many fetishes and banners tied to branches and the gas-lamps.

Lorn's sense of those she sought was strong, unerring. Once past the hills, she could see an inner wall. Sergeant Whiskeyjack and his squad were somewhere beyond it, in the lower city. Lorn strode through the surging crowds, one hand hitched in her sword belt, the other massaging the puffed red flesh around her wound.

The guard at Worry Gate pushed himself from the wall he had been leaning against and paced a slow circle on the cobblestones. He paused to adjust his peaked helmet, loosening the strap a notch.

The other guard, an older man, bandy-legged and short, approached. 'Those fools out there making you uneasy?' he asked with a grin more gaps than teeth.

The first man glanced through the gateway. 'Had a near-riot here a couple of years back,' he said.

'I was there,' the old man said, hawking on to the stones. 'We had to pull the hoods off our polearms, draw some blood. That sent them packing, and I don't think the lesson's gone on them. I wouldn't worry much. This ain't your regular duty, is it?'

'No, just filling in time for a friend.'

'That's the way of it, isn't it? What's your usual round?'

'Midnight till the third bell, Despot's Barbican,' Circle Breaker replied. He adjusted his helmet again, hoping the unseen friendly eyes had marked his signal. That woman who had passed through a few minutes ago had matched the Eel's description perfectly. Circle Breaker knew he wasn't mistaken.

She'd looked the warrior, dressed as a mercenary and trying to hide the blood-stains of a wound on her shoulder. His searching glance had been but momentary. Years of practice, however, made it sufficient. He'd caught everything the Eel's messenger had told him to look for.

'That's a hell of a watch,' the old man said beside him, turning to squint up at Despot's Park. 'And you were here t' meet the dawn.' He wagged his head. 'The bastards got us working too hard these days, what with the city infiltrated with Empire spies and the like.'

'It doesn't get any better,' Circle Breaker agreed.

'I'm here for another three hours, and you think they give me some time to join my wife and kids in the festival?' The old man spat again. 'No way. Old Berrute's off to stand around watching other people having fun in some bloody estate.'

Circle Breaker held his breath, then sighed. 'Lady Simtal's Fete, I suppose.'

'Damn right. Bloody Councilmen chuffing around with all their stinking airs. And me with sore feet and all, standing like a statue.'

This was a bit of luck, Circle Breaker smiled to himself. His companion's next station was precisely what the Eel had wanted for Circle Breaker. Better yet, the old man was complaining about it. 'They need those statues,' he said. 'Keeps them secure.' He stepped close to Berrute. 'Didn't you tell the sergeant about your bad feet?'

'What's the point?' Berrute complained. 'He just delivered them orders, he didn't come up with them.'

Circle Breaker looked up the street, as if considering something, then he laid a hand on the other's shoulder and met his gaze. 'Look, I don't have any family. For me, today's just another day. I'll stand in for you, Berrute. Next time I want some time off, though, I'll come calling.'

Genuine relief lit the old man's eyes. 'Nerruse bless you,' he said, grinning again. 'It's a deal, friend. Hey, I don't even know your name!'

Circle Breaker smiled, then told him.

With most of the revelry out in the streets, the interior of Quip's Bar was all but deserted. Adjunct Lorn paused inside the doorway and waited for her eyes to adjust to the gloom. A few desultory voices drifted out to her, mingling with the clatter of wooden cards.

She entered the low-ceilinged chamber. A dishevelled old woman watched her dully from behind the counter. Against the far wall was a table

at which sat three men. Copper coins glittered in the lamplight, amid pools of spilled beer on the tabletop. The men held cards in their hands.

The man with his back against the wall, wearing a scorched leather cap, looked up to meet Lorn's eyes. He gestured to an empty chair. 'Have a seat, Adjunct,' he said. 'Join in the game.'

Lorn blinked, then hid her shock with a shrug. 'I don't gamble,' she said, lowering herself into the rickety chair.

The man examined his cards. 'Not what I meant,' he said.

The one seated on her left muttered, 'Meant a different game, did Hedge.'

She turned to regard him. Skinny, short, with massive wrists. 'And what's your name, soldier?' she asked quietly.

'Fiddler. The guy losing his coins is Mallet. We've been expecting you.'

'So I gather,' Lorn said drily, leaning back. 'Your intelligence impresses me, gentlemen. Is the sergeant nearby?'

'Making the rounds,' Fiddler said. 'Should be by in ten minutes or so. We've got the back room in this rat trap. Right up against the Tier wall.'

Hedge added, 'Me and Fid dug through that damn wall, seven bloody feet thick at its base. An abandoned house on the Daru side.' He grinned. 'It's our back door.'

'So you're the saboteurs. And Mallet? A healer, correct?'

Mallet nodded, still contemplating his cards. 'C'mon, Fiddler,' he said, 'it's your game. Let's hear the next rule.'

Fiddler sat forward. 'Knight of House Dark is the wild card,' he said. 'That's the opening suit, too. Unless you're holding the Virgin of Death. If you get her you can open with half ante and double up if you win the round.'

Mallet slapped down the Virgin of Death. He tossed a single copper coin into the centre of the table. 'Let's run it through, then.'

Fiddler dealt the man another card. 'We ante up now, Hedge, two coppers apiece and High Hell come the Herald of Death.'

Lorn watched the bizarre game proceed. These men were using a Deck of Dragons. Astonishing. The man Fiddler was inventing the rules as they went along, and yet she watched the cards merge into a pattern on the tabletop. Her brows knitted thoughtfully.

'You got the Hound on the run,' Fiddler said, pointing at the latest card placed on the table by Mallet. 'Knight of Dark's close, I can feel it.'

'But what about this damned Virgin of Death?' groused the healer.

'She's had her teeth pulled. Take a look, the Rope's right outa the picture, ain't he?' Fiddler laid another card. 'And there's the Dragon bastard himself, sword all smoking and black as a moonless night. That's what's got the Hound scampering.'

'Wait a minute,' Hedge cried, ramming down a card atop the Knight of Dark. 'You said the Captain of Light's rising, right?'

Fiddler concentrated on the pattern. 'He's right, Mallet. We pay over two coppers each automatically. That Captain's already dancing on the Knight's shadow—'

'Excuse me,' Lorn said loudly. The three men looked at her. 'Are you a Talent, Fiddler? Should you be using this deck?'

Fiddler scowled. 'It ain't your business, Adjunct. We been playing for years, nobody's tossed a dagger our way. You want in, just say so. Here, I'll give you your first card.'

Before she could protest he placed a card before her, face up. She stared down at it.

'Now, ain't that odd?' Fiddler remarked. 'Throne, inverted. You owe us all ten gold each – a year's pay for all of us, hell of a coincidence.'

Hedge snorted loudly. 'Also happens to be the Empire Guilt Coin paid to our kin once we're confirmed dead. Thanks a lot, Fid.'

'Take the coin and shut up,' Fiddler snapped. 'We ain't dead yet.'

'I'm still holding a card,' Mallet said.

Fiddler rolled his eyes. 'So let's see the damn thing, then.'

The healer set the card down.

'Orb.' Fiddler laughed. 'True sight and judgement closes this game, wouldn't you know it?'

Lorn sensed a presence at her back. She turned slowly to find a bearded man behind her. His flat grey eyes held hers. 'I'm Whiskeyjack,' he said softly. 'Good morning, Adjunct, and welcome to Darujhistan.' He found a nearby chair and pulled it to the table, sitting down beside Hedge. 'You'll want a report, right? Well, we're still trying to contact the Assassin's Guild. All the mining's done, ready for the order. One squad member lost thus far. In other words, we've been damn lucky. There are Tiste Andii in the city, hunting us.'

'Who have you lost, Sergeant?' Lorn asked.

'The recruit. Sorry was her name.'

'Dead?'

'Been missing for a few days now.'

Lorn clenched her teeth to bite back a curse. 'So you don't know if she's dead?'

'No. Is there a problem, Adjunct? She was just a recruit. Even if she'd been nabbed by the guard, there's scant little she could tell them. Besides, we've heard no such news. More likely some thugs scrubbed her in some back alley – we've been scurrying down a lot of rat-holes trying to find these local assassins.' He shrugged. 'It's a risk you live with, that's all.'

'Sorry was a spy,' Lorn explained. 'A very good one, Sergeant. You can be certain that no thug killed her. No, she's not dead. She's hiding, because she knew I'd come looking for her. I've been on her trail for three years. I want her.'

'If we'd had a hint of all this,' Whiskeyjack said tightly, 'it could've been arranged, Adjunct. But you kept it to yourself, and that makes you on your own now.' His eyes hardened on her. 'Whether we contact the Guild or not, we detonate the mines before tomorrow's dawn, and then we're out of here.'

Lorn drew herself up. 'I am Adjunct to the Empress, Sergeant. As of now this mission is under my direction. You will take orders from me. All this independent crap is over, understand?' For a moment she almost thought she saw a flash of triumph in the man's eyes. A second look revealed it to be no more than the expected anger.

'Understood, Adjunct,' Whiskeyjack replied curtly. 'What are your orders?'

'I am serious in this, Sergeant,' she warned. 'And I don't care how angry this makes you. Now, I suggest we retire to more private surroundings.' She rose. 'Your men can remain here.'

Whiskeyjack stood. 'Of course, Adjunct. We have the back room. If you will follow me.'

Lorn reached down to the bed's top blanket. 'There is blood here, Sergeant.' She turned to regard the man as he closed the door.

He faced her. 'One of my men had a brush with a Tiste Andii assassin-mage. He'll recover.'

'Highly unlikely, Sergeant. The Tiste Andii are all with Caladan Brood in the north.' Her eyes widened in disbelief. 'You don't mean to suggest that the Lord of Moon's Spawn himself has left his fortress? To do what? Hunt down Malazan spies? Don't be absurd.'

Whiskeyjack scowled. 'Corporal Kalam and my squad mage had a rooftop engagement with at least half a dozen Tiste Andii. That my men survived makes it highly unlikely that the Moon's lord was anywhere in the vicinity, doesn't it, Adjunct? Put it together. The Moon stations itself just south of the city. Its lord strikes an alliance with Darujhistan's rulers, and their first

task is to wipe out the local Assassins' Guild. Why? To prevent people like us from contacting them and offering a contract. And, so far, it's worked.'

Lorn thought for a time, then she said, 'So if the Guild cannot be contacted, why not do the assassinations yourselves? Your Corporal Kalam ranked among the best in the Claw before his ... his falling out. Why not take out the city's rulers?'

The man folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the wall beside the door. 'We've been considering that, Adjunct. And we're a step ahead of you. Right now, one of my men is negotiating for us to work as private strong-arms for a highbrow Fete this evening. Everybody who's anybody is supposed to attend – Council members, High Mages, the works. My saboteurs have enough left-over munitions to make it a party this city will have a hard time forgetting.'

Lorn struggled against a growing sense of frustration. As much as she'd intended to take command of things, it seemed that this Whiskeyjack had been doing just fine up until now, given the circumstances. She suspected she could not have done things any better, though she still doubted the story about the Tiste Andii. 'Why on earth,' she asked finally, 'would an estate hire a bunch of strangers as guards?'

'Oh, there'll be city soldiers there as well. But none of them is a Barghast.' Whiskeyjack smiled cynically. 'Titillation factor, Adjunct. It's what makes the nobility drool. Look there, a big tattooed barbarian glowering down at them. Exciting, yes?' He shrugged. 'It's a risk, but one worth taking. Unless, of course, you have a better idea, Adjunct?'

She heard the challenge in his tone. Had she thought about it, she would have realized long before now that her title and power would not intimidate this man. He'd stood at Dassem Ultor's side, arguing tactics with the Sword of the Empire in the midst of battle. And it seemed that demotion to sergeant had failed to break this man – that much she'd gathered from the Bridgeburners' reputation at Pale. He would not hesitate to challenge her every command if he found reason to do so. 'Your plan is sound,' she said. 'Tell me the name of this estate.'

'Some woman named Lady Simtal. I don't know the family name, but everybody seems to know her. Said to be a real looker, with influence in the Council.'

'Very well,' Lorn said, adjusting her cloak. 'I'll return in two hours, Sergeant. There are other matters I must attend to. Be certain that all is ready – detonation procedures included. If you don't get hired, we'll have to find another way of being at that fete.' She strode to the door.

'Adjunct?'

She turned.

Whiskeyjack walked to the back wall and pulled aside a tattered hanging. 'This tunnel emerges into another house. From it you can enter the Daru District.'

'Unnecessary.' Lorn was irritated by his condescending tone.

As soon as she was gone Quick Ben scrambled from the tunnel. 'Dammit, Sergeant,' he muttered. 'You almost had her walking in on me!'

'No chance,' Whiskeyjack observed. 'In fact, I made certain she wouldn't use it. Anything from Kalam?'

Quick Ben paced the small room. 'Not yet. But he's about to run out of patience.' He turned to the sergeant. 'So? Do you think she was fooled?'

'Fooled?' Whiskeyjack laughed. 'She was reeling.'

'Paran said she was going to drop something off,' Quick Ben said. 'Did she?'

'Not yet.'

'It's getting tight, Sergeant. Damn tight.'

The other door opened and Trotts entered, his filed teeth exposed in something between a smile and a grimace.

'Success?' Whiskeyjack asked.

Trotts nodded.

As the afternoon waned Crokus and Apsalar waited atop the tower's platform. Every now and then they peered over the edge to watch the festivities. There was a taste of mania among the crowds below, as if they danced on the rim of desperation. In spite of the season's rejoicing, the shadow of the Malazan Empire hung over all. Indeed, with Moon's Spawn immediately to the south, Darujhistan's place between the two forces was obvious to everyone.

'Somehow,' Crokus muttered, as he watched the crowds moving down the streets like churning rivers, 'Darujhistan seems smaller. Almost insignificant.'

'It looks huge to me,' Apsalar said. 'It's one of the biggest cities I've ever seen,' she said. 'As big as Unta, I think.'

He stared at her. She'd been saying strange things lately, which did not seem right coming from a fishergirl from a small coastal village. 'Unta. That's the Empire capital, isn't it?'

She frowned, which made her look older. 'Yes. Only I've never been there.'

'Well, how could you know how big it is, then?'

'I'm not sure, Crokus.'

Possession, Coll had said. Two sets of memory warred in the woman, and the war was getting worse. He wondered if Mammot had shown up yet. For a moment he came near to regretting their escape from Meese and Irilta. But then his thoughts turned to what was to come. He sat down on the platform and propped himself against the low wall. He stared at the assassin's body across from him. The blood that had been spilled had blackened under the hot sun. A trail of droplets crossed the floor to the stairs. Clearly, this assassin's killer had himself been wounded. Yet Crokus did not feel in danger, up here, although he wasn't sure why.

For an abandoned belfry tower, this place had witnessed a lot of drama lately.

'Are we waiting for night?' Apsalar asked.

Crokus nodded.

'Then we find this Challice?'

'That's right. The D'Arles will be at Lady Simtal's Fête, I'm sure of it. The estate has an enormous garden, almost a forest. It goes right up to the back wall. Getting in should be easy.'

'Won't you be noticed once you join the guests, though?'

'I'll be dressed as a thief. Everybody will be wearing costumes. Besides, there'll be hundreds of people there. It might take an hour or two, but I'll find her.'

'And then?'

'I'll think of something,' Crokus said.

Apsalar stretched out her legs on the paving stones and crossed her arms. 'And I'm supposed to hide in the bushes, huh?'

He shrugged. 'Maybe Uncle Mammot will be there,' he said. 'Then everything will be all right.'

'Why?'

'Because that's what Coll said,' Crokus shot back, exasperated. Was he supposed to tell her she'd been possessed for who knew how long? 'We'll work out a way to get you home,' he explained. 'That's what you want, right?'

She nodded slowly, as if no longer certain of that. 'I miss my father,' she said.

To Crokus, Apsalar sounded as though she was trying to convince herself. He'd looked at her when they'd arrived, thinking, Why not? And he had to admit to himself now that her company wasn't bad. Except for all the questions, of course. Mind, what if he'd been in her situation, waking up thousands of leagues from home? It'd be terrifying. Would he have held up as well as she seemed to be doing?

'I'm feeling all right,' she said, watching him. 'It's as if something inside is keeping things together. I can't explain it any better, but it's like a smooth, black stone. Solid and warm, and whenever I start getting scared it takes me inside. And then everything's fine again.' She added, 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push you away.'

'Never mind,' he said.

Within the shadows of the stairwell, Serrat studied the two figures out on the platform. Enough was enough. She'd opened her Kurald Galain Warren into a defensive layering of wards around her. No more of these invisible enemies. If they wanted her, they'd have to show themselves. And then she'd kill them. And as for the Coin Bearer and the girl, where could they hope to escape to, up here on this tower?

She unsheathed her daggers and prepared for her attack. A dozen wards protected her back, all along the staircase. An approach from there was impossible.

Two sharp points touched her flesh, one under her chin and the other beneath her left shoulder blade. The Tiste Andii froze. And then she heard a voice close to her ear – a voice she recognized.

'Give Rake this warning, Serrat. He'll only get one, and the same for you. The Coin Bearer shall not be harmed. The games are done. Try this again and you'll die.'

'You bastard!' she exploded. 'My lord's anger—'

'Will be in vain. We both know who sends this message, don't we? And, as Rake well knows, he's not as far away as he once was.' The point beneath her chin moved away to allow her to nod, then returned. 'Good. Deliver the message, then, and hope we don't meet again.'

'This will not be forgotten,' Serrat promised, shaking with rage.

A low chuckle answered her. 'Compliments of the Prince, Serrat. Take it up with our mutual friend.'

The daggers left her flesh. Serrat exhaled a long breath, then sheathed her weapons. She snapped a Kurald Galain spell and vanished.

Crokus jumped at a faint plopping sound from the stairwell. He laid his hands on his knives, tensing.

'What's wrong?' Apsalar said.

'Shhh. Wait.' He felt his heart pound hard against his chest. 'I'm ducking at shadows,' he said, sitting back. 'Well, we're off soon, anyway.'

It was an age of wind, sweeping across the grass plains beneath a pewter sky, a wind whose thirst assailed all life, mindless, unrelenting like a beast that did not know itself.

Struggling in his mother's wake, it was Raest's first lesson in power. In the hunt for domination that would shape his life, he saw the many ways of the wind – its subtle sculpting of stone over hundreds and then thousands of years, and its raging gales that flattened forests – and found closest to his heart the violent power of the wind's banshee fury.

Raest's mother had been the first to flee his deliberate shaping of power. She'd denied him to his face, proclaiming the Sundering of Blood and thus cutting him free. That the ritual had broken her he disregarded. It was unimportant. He who would dominate must learn early that those resisting his command should be destroyed. Failure was her price, not his.

While the Jaghut feared community, pronouncing society to be the birthplace of tyranny – of the flesh and the spirit – and citing their own bloody history as proof, Raest discovered a hunger for it. The power he commanded insisted upon subjects. Strength was ever relative, and he could not dominate without the company of the dominated.

At first he sought to subjugate other Jaghut, but more often than not they either escaped him or he was forced to kill them. Such contests held only momentary satisfaction. Raest gathered beasts around him, bending nature

to his will. But nature withered and died in bondage, and so found an escape he could not control. In his anger he laid waste to the land, driving into extinction countless species. The earth resisted him, and its power was immense. Yet it was directionless and could not overwhelm Raest in its ageless tide. His was a focused power, precise in its destruction and pervasive in its effect.

Then into his path came the first of the Imass, creatures who struggled against his will, defying slavery and yet living on. Creatures of boundless, pitiful hope. For Raest, he had found in them the glory of domination, for with each Imass that broke he took another. Their link with nature was minimal, for the Imass themselves played the game of tyranny over their lands. They could not defeat him.

He fashioned an empire of sorts, bereft of cities yet plagued with the endless dramas of society, its pathetic victories and inevitable failures. The community of enslaved Imass thrived in this quagmire of pettiness. They even managed to convince themselves that they possessed freedom, a will of their own that could shape destiny. They elected champions. They tore down their champions once failure draped its shroud over them. They ran in endless circles and called it growth, emergence, knowledge. While over them all, a presence invisible to their eyes, Raest flexed his will. His greatest joy came when his slaves proclaimed him god – though they knew him not – and constructed temples to serve him and organized priesthoods whose activities mimicked Raest's tyranny with such cosmic irony that the Jaghut could only shake his head.

It should have been an empire to last for millennia, and its day of dying should have been by his own hand, when he at last tired of it. Raest had never imagined that other Jaghut would find his activities abhorrent, that they would risk themselves and their own power on behalf of these short-lived, small-minded Imass. Yet what astonished Raest more than anything else was that when the Jaghut came they came in numbers, in community. A community whose sole purpose of existence was to destroy his empire, to imprison him.

He had been unprepared.

The lesson was learned, and no matter what the world had become since that time, Raest was ready for it. His limbs creaked at first, throbbing with dull aches bridged by sharp pangs. The effort of digging himself from the frozen earth had incapacitated him for a time, but finally he felt ready to walk the tunnel that opened out into a new land.

Preparation. Already he'd initiated his first moves. He sensed that others had come to him, had freed the path of Omtose Phellack wards and seals. Perhaps his worshippers remained, fanatics who had sought his release for generations, and even now awaited him beyond the barrow.

The missing Finnest would be his first priority. Much of his power had been stored within the seed, stripped from him and stored there by the Jaghut betrayers. It had not been carried far, and there was nothing that could prevent his recovering it. Omtose Phellack no longer existed in the land above – he could feel its absence like an airless void. Nothing could oppose him now.

Preparation. Raest's withered, cracked face twisted into a savage grin, his lower tusks splitting desiccated skin. The powerful must gather other power, subjugate it to their own will, then direct it unerringly. His moves had already begun.

He sloshed through the slush now covering the barrow's muddy floor. Before him rose the slanted wall that marked the tomb's barrier. Beyond the lime-streaked earth waited a world to be enslaved. Raest gestured and the barrier exploded outward. Bright sunlight flared in the clouds of steam rolling around him, and he felt waves of cold, ancient air sweeping past him.

The Jaghut Tyrant walked into the light.

The Great Raven Crone rode the hot streams of wind high above the Gadrobi Hills. The burst of power that launched tons of earth and rocks a hundred feet into the sky elicited a cackle from her. She dipped a wing, eyes on the white pillar of steam, and banked towards it.

This, she laughed to herself, should prove interesting.

A wash of air pounded down on to her. Shrieking her outrage, Crone twisted and slid along the shunting wind. Massive shadows flowed over her. Her anger was swept away on a surge of excitement. Head craning, she beat the air with her wings and climbed again. In matters such as these, a proper point of view was essential. Crone climbed higher still, then cocked her head and looked down. By the light of the sun scales flashed iridescent from five ridged backs, but of the five one shone like fire. Sorcerous power bled in ripples from the web of their spread wings. The dragons sailed silent over the landscape, closing on the billowing dust-cloud above the Jaghut tomb. Crone's black eyes fixed on the dragon that blazed red.

'Silanah!' she screamed, laughing. *'Dragnipurake t'na Draconiaes! Eleint, eleint!'* The day of the Tiste Andii had come.

Raest emerged into rich afternoon sunlight. Yellow-grassed hills rose in weathered humps in every direction but the one he faced. To the east behind a thinning curtain of drifting dust stretched an empty plain.

The Jaghut Tyrant grunted. Not so different after all. He raised his arms, feeling wind slide along his cabled muscles. He drew a breath, tasting the life-rich air. He quested lightly with his power and exulted in the waves of fear that answered it – answers that came from the mindless life beneath his feet or hiding in the grasses around him. But of higher life, higher concentrations of power, he sensed nothing. Raest drove his senses down into the ground, seeking what dwelt there. Earth and bedrock, the sluggish molten darkness beneath, down, down to find the sleeping goddess – young as far as the Jaghut Tyrant was concerned. 'Shall I wake you?' he whispered. 'Not yet. But I shall make you bleed.' His right hand closed into a fist.

He speared the goddess with pain, driving a fissure through the bedrock, feeling the gush of her blood, enough to make her stir but not awaken.

The line of hills to the north lifted skyward. Magma sprayed into the air amid a rising pillar of smoke, rock and ash. The earth shuddered even as the

sound of the eruption swept over Raest in a fierce, hot wind. The Jaghut Tyrant smiled.

He studied the shattered ridge and breathed the heavy, sulphurous air, then turned about and strode west towards the highest hill in that direction. His Finnest lay beyond it, perhaps three days' walk. He considered opening his Warren, then decided to wait until he reached the hill's summit. From that vantage point, he could better judge the Finnest's location.

Half-way up the slope he heard distant laughter. Raest stiffened just as the day darkened suddenly around him. On the sward before him he saw five enormous shadows sweeping up the slope, then beyond the hill's summit. The sunlight returned. The Jaghut Tyrant looked into the sky above him.

Five dragons banked in perfect formation, their heads dipping to watch him as they glided back in his direction. *'Estideein eleint,'* he whispered, in his Jaghut tongue. Four were black, barbed in silver along the wings and flying two to either side of the fifth dragon, this one red and twice as large as the others. 'Silanah red-wings,' Raest muttered, eyes narrowing. 'Elder-born and true-blooded Tiam, you lead Soletaken, whose blood is alien to this world. I feel you all!' He raised fists to the sky. 'Colder than the ice born of Jaghut hands, as dark as blindness- I feel you!'

He lowered his arms. 'Harass me not, *eleint.* I cannot enslave you, but I will destroy you. Know that. I will drive you to the ground, each and all, and with my own hands I shall tear your hearts from your chests.' His eyes narrowed on the four black dragons. 'Soletaken. You would challenge me at the command of another. You would battle with me for no reason of your own. Ah, but if I were to command you I would not throw your lives away so carelessly. I would cherish you, Soletaken, I would give you causes worth believing in, show you the true rewards of power.' Raest scowled, as their derision swept through his mind. 'So be it.'

The dragons passed low overhead in silence, banking once again and disappearing behind the hills to the south. Raest spread his arms wide and unleashed his Warren. His flesh split as power flowed into him. His arms shed skin like ash. He both felt and heard hills crack all around him, the

snapping of stone, the sundering of crags. To all sides the horizons blurred as dust curtained skyward. He faced south. *'This is my power! Come to me!'*

A long minute passed. He frowned at the hills before him, then cried out and whirled to his right just as Silanah and the four black dragons, all less than ten feet above the ground, plunged over the summit of the hill he'd been climbing.

Raest screamed at the whirlwind of power battering him, his shrunken eyes locked on Silanah's blank, empty, deadly gaze – eyes as large as the Jaghut's head – as it bore down upon him with the speed of a springing viper. The red dragon's jaws opened wide and Raest found himself staring down the beast's throat.

He screamed a second time and released his power all at once.

The air detonated as the Warrens collided. Jagged shards of rock ripped in all directions. Starvald Demelain and Kurald Galain warred with Omtose Phellack in a savage maelstrom of will. Grasses, earth and rock withered to fine ash on all sides, and within the vortex stood Raest, his power roaring from him. Lashes of sorcery from the dragons lanced into his body, boring through his withered flesh.

The Jaghut Tyrant flayed his power like a scythe. Blood spattered the ground, sprayed in gouts. The dragons shrieked.

A wave of incandescent fire struck Raest from the right, solid as a battering fist. Howling, he was thrown through the air, landing in a bank of powdery ash. Silanah's fire raced over him, blackening what was left of his flesh. The Tyrant clambered upright, his body jerking uncontrollably as sorcery gouted from his right hand.

The ground shook as Raest's power hammered Silanah down, driving the dragon skidding and tumbling across the slope. The Tyrant's exultant roar was cut short as talons the length of a forearm crunched into him from behind. A second clawed foot joined the first, snapping through the bones of Raest's chest as if they were twigs. More talons flexed around him as a second dragon sought grip.

The Tyrant twisted helplessly as the claws lifted him into the air and started ripping his body apart. He dislocated his own shoulder in reaching round to dig his fingers into a sleek scaled shin. At the contact, Omtose Phellack surged into the dragon's leg, shattering bone, boiling blood. Raest laughed as the claws spasmed loose and he was flung away. More bones snapped as he struck the ground, but it did not matter. His power was absolute, the vessel that carried it had little relevance. If need be, the Tyrant would find other bodies, bodies in the thousands.

He climbed once more to his feet. 'Now,' he whispered, 'I deliver death.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The flowering of light from darkness
brought into my sight there on the field
a host of dragons caught
like a crest of wind before the eternal flame.
I saw the ages in their eyes
a worldly map inscribed
in each whirled scale on their hides.
Their sorcery bled from them
like the breathing of stars
and I knew then
that dragons had come among us ...

Anomandaris
Fisher (b.?)

Shadows crowded the garden's undergrowth. Adjunct Lorn rose from her crouch and brushed the dirt from her hands. 'Find an acorn.' She smiled to herself. 'Plant it.' Somewhere beyond the heavily wooded garden, servants shouted at each other as they scrambled about making last-minute arrangements. She hitched her cloak's tail into her belt and quietly slipped among the boles of vine-wrapped trees. A moment later the back wall came into view.

An alley lay beyond, narrow and choked with the leaves and fallen branches from the gardens rising above the walls on its either side. Her route in – and now out – was a thing of ease. She scaled the rough-stoned wall, grasping vines when necessary, then slid over the top.

She landed with a soft crunch of twigs and dry leaves, within shadows as deep as those in the garden. She adjusted her cloak, then walked to one end

of the alley where she leaned against a corner, crossed her arms and smiled at the crowds passing to and fro on the street before her.

Two tasks left to perform, then she would leave this city. One of those tasks, however, might prove impossible. She sensed nothing of Sorry's presence. Perhaps the woman was indeed dead. Under the circumstances it was the only explanation.

She watched the sea of people, its tide of faces swirling past. The latent madness there made her uneasy, especially with the city's guards maintaining an aloof distance. She wondered at the taint of terror in that multitude of faces, and how almost every face seemed familiar.

Darujhistan blurred in her mind, becoming a hundred other cities, each rising out of her past as if on parade. Joy and fear, agony and laughter – the expressions merged into one, the sounds coming to her no different from each other. She could distinguish nothing, the faces becoming expressionless, the sounds a roar of history without meaning.

Lorn passed a hand over her eyes, then staggered back a step and reeled into the alley's shadows behind her. She slid down one wall into a sagging crouch. A *celebration of insignificance. Is that all we are in the end? Listen to them!* In a few hours the city's intersections would explode. Hundreds would die instantly, thousands to follow. Amid the rubble of shattered cobbles and toppled buildings would be these faces, locked in expressions somewhere between joy and terror. And from the dying would come sounds, hopeless cries that dwindled in the passing of pain.

She'd seen them all before, those faces. She knew them all, knew the sound of their voices, sounds mired in human emotions, sounds clear and pure with thought, and sounds wavering in that chasm between the two. Is this, she wondered, my legacy? *And one day I'll be just one more of those faces, frozen in death and wonder.*

Lorn shook her head, but it was a wan effort. She realized, with sudden comprehension, that she was breaking down. The Adjunct was cracking, its armour crumbling and the lustre gone from its marbled grandeur. A title as

meaningless as the woman bearing it. The Empress – just another face she'd seen somewhere before, a mask behind which someone hid from mortality.

'No use hiding,' she whispered, frowning down at the dead leaves and branches around her. 'No use.'

A few minutes later she pushed herself upright once again. She brushed the dirt meticulously from her cloak. One task remained within her abilities. Find the Coin Bearer. Kill him, and take Oponn's Coin. Make the god pay for its intrusion in Empire affairs – the Empress and Tayschrenn would see to that.

The task demanded concentration, fixing her senses upon one particular signature. It would be her last act, she knew. But she would succeed. Death at the hands of failure was unthinkable. Lorn turned to the street. Dusk crept from the ground and engulfed the crowds. Far off to the east thunder sounded, yet the air was dry, with no hint of rain. She checked her weapons. 'The Adjunct's mission,' she said quietly, 'is almost done.'

She entered the street and disappeared into the mob.

Kruppe rose from his table at the Phoenix Inn and attempted to fasten the last button on his waistcoat. Failing, he let his stomach relax once again and let loose a weary sigh. Well, at least the coat had been cleaned. He adjusted the cuffs of his new shirt, then walked out of the mostly empty bar.

He'd spent the last hour seated at his table, to all outward appearances musing on nothing of great importance, though in his head a pattern formed, born of his Talent, and it disturbed him greatly. Meese and Irilta losing Crokus and the girl brought everything into focus – as with most unwitting servants of the gods, once the game was done so was the servant's life. The Coin might be gambled in a single contest, but to have it floating around indefinitely was far too dangerous. No, Crokus would find his luck abandoning him when he needed it most, and it would cost the lad his life.

'No, no,' Kruppe had murmured over his tankard. 'Kruppe can't permit that.' Yet the pattern of success remained elusive. He felt certain he had

covered all the potential threats regarding the lad or, rather, someone was doing a good job of protecting Crokus – that much the pattern showed him. He experienced a nagging suspicion that the 'someone' wasn't himself, or any of his agents. And he'd just have to trust in its integrity.

Circle Breaker had come through yet again, and Kruppe was still confident that Turban Orr's hunt for the man would prove fruitless. The Eel knew how to protect his own. In fact, Circle Breaker was due for retirement – for the man's own safety – and Kruppe intended to deliver the good news this very night, at Lady Simtal's Fête. Circle Breaker deserved no less after all these years.

The pattern also told him something he already knew: his cover was blown. The spell he had cast on Murillio wouldn't last much longer, nor was it required to. Kruppe had wanted his freedom unimpeded this day. After that, well, things would fall as they would fall – and the same applied for his meeting with Baruk.

If anything gave Kruppe pause, it was the pattern's abrupt ending. Beyond tonight, the future was blank. Clearly, a crux had been reached, and it would turn, he knew, at Lady Simtal's Fête.

Kruppe now entered the Higher Estates District, with a generous nod at the lone guard stationed near the ramp. The man scowled, but otherwise made no comment. The Fête was set to begin in thirty minutes, and Kruppe planned on being one of the first to arrive. His mouth watered at the thought of all those pastries, fresh and dripping with warm, sweet liquids. He removed his mask from inside his coat and smiled at it. Perhaps, among all those attending, High Alchemist Baruk alone would appreciate the irony of this moulded visage. Ah, well, he sighed. One is more than enough, given who that one is. After all, is Kruppe greedy?

His stomach rumbled in answer.

Crokus strained his eyes towards the darkening east. Something like lightning flashed every now and then beyond the hills, each one closer than the last. But the thunder's rumble, which had begun early that afternoon and

still continued, sounded somehow wrong, its timbre unlike the normal bass that rolled through the earth. It seemed almost brittle. The clouds that had appeared over the hill earlier had been an eerie ochre colour, sickly, and those clouds now approached the city.

'When are we leaving?' Apsalar asked, leaning on the wall beside him.

Crokus shook himself. 'Now. It's dark enough.'

'Crokus? What will you do if Challice D'Arle betrays you a second time?'

He could barely see her face in the gloom. Had she meant that to cut? It was hard to tell from her voice. 'She won't,' he said, telling himself that he believed it. 'Trust me,' and he turned towards the stairwell.

'I do,' she said simply.

Crokus winced. Why did she make things seem so easy for her? Hood's Breath, *he* wouldn't trust him. Of course, he didn't know Challice very well. They'd only had that one, confusing conversation. What if she called the guards? Well, he'd make sure Apsalar got away safely. He paused and grasped her arm. 'Listen,' his own voice sounded unduly harsh, but he pushed on, 'if something goes wrong, go to the Phoenix Inn. Right? Find Meese, Irilta, or my friends Kruppe and Murillio. Tell them what happened.'

'All right, Crokus.'

'Good.' He released her arm. 'Wish we had a lantern,' he said, as he stepped into the darkness, one hand reaching before him.

'Why?' Apsalar asked, slipping past him. She took his hand and led him down. 'I can see. Don't let go of my hand.'

That might be a hard thing to do even if he'd desired it, he realized. Still, there were a lot of rough calluses on that small hand. He let them remind him of what this woman was capable of doing, though the effort embarrassed him in some vague way.

Eyes wide, yet seeing nothing, Crokus allowed himself to be guided down the stairs.

The captain of Simtal's House Guard viewed Whiskeyjack and his men with obvious distaste. 'I thought you were all Barghast.' He stepped up to Trotts and jabbed a finger into the warrior's massive chest. 'You led me to believe you were all like you, Niganga.'

A low, menacing growl emerged from Trotts, and the captain stepped back, one hand reaching for his short sword.

'Captain,' Whiskeyjack said, 'if we were all Barghast—'

The man's narrow face swung to him with a scowl.

'– you'd never be able to afford us,' the sergeant finished with a tight smile. He glanced at Trotts. *Niganga? Hood's Breath!* 'Niganga is my second-in-command, Captain. Now, how would you like us positioned?'

'Just beyond the fountain,' he said. 'Your backs will be to the garden, which has, ah, run wild of late. We don't want any guests getting lost in there, so you gently steer them back. Understood? And when I say gently I mean it. You're to salute anyone who talks to you, and if there's an argument direct them to me, Captain Stillis. I'll be making the rounds, but any one of the house guard can find me.'

Whiskeyjack nodded. 'Understood, sir.' He turned to survey his squad. Fiddler and Hedge stood behind Trotts, both looking eager. Past them Mallet and Quick Ben stood on the edge of the street, heads bent together in conversation. The sergeant frowned at them, noticing how his wizard winced with every boom of thunder to the east.

Captain Stillis marched off after giving them directions through the estate's rooms out to the terrace and garden beyond. Whiskeyjack waited for the man to leave his line of sight, then he strode to Quick Ben and Mallet. 'What's wrong?' he asked.

Quick Ben looked frightened.

Mallet said, 'That thunder and lightning, Sergeant? Well, it ain't no storm. Paran's story is looking real.'

'Meaning we have little time,' Whiskeyjack said. 'Wonder why the Adjunct didn't show up – you think she's melting her boots getting away from here?'

Mallet shrugged.

'Don't you get it?' Quick Ben said shakily. He took a couple of deep breaths, then continued, 'That creature out there is in a fight. We're talking major sorceries, only it's getting closer, which means that it's winning. And that means—'

'We're in trouble,' Whiskeyjack finished. 'All right, we go as planned for now. Come on, we've been assigned right where we want to be. Quick Ben, you sure Kalam and Paran can find us?'

The wizard moaned. 'Directions delivered, Sergeant.'

'Good. Let's move, then. Through the house and eyes forward.'

'He looks like he's going to sleep for days,' Kalam said, straightening beside Coil's bed and facing the captain.

Paran rubbed his red-shot eyes. 'She must have given them something,' he insisted wearily, 'even if they didn't see it.'

Kalam wagged his head. 'I've told you, sir, she didn't. Everyone was on the look-out for something like that. The squad's still clean. Now, we'd better get moving.'

Paran climbed to his feet with an effort. He was exhausted, and he knew he was just an added burden. 'She'll turn up at this estate, then,' he insisted, strapping on his sword.

'Well,' Kalam said, as he walked to the door, 'that's where you and me come in, right? She shows up and we take her out – just like you've wanted to do all along.'

'Right now,' Paran said, joining the assassin, 'the shape I'm in will make my role in the fight a short one. Consider me the surprise factor, the one

thing she won't be expecting, the one thing that'll stop her for a second.' He looked into the man's dark eyes. 'Make that second count, Corporal.'

Kalam grinned. 'I hear you, sir.'

They left Coll still snoring contentedly and went down to the bar's main floor. As they passed along the counter, Scurve looked at them warily.

Kalam released an exasperated curse and, in a surge of motion, reached out and grasped him by the shirt. He pulled the squealing innkeeper halfway across the counter until their faces were inches apart. 'I'm sick of waiting,' the assassin growled. 'You get this message to this city's Master of the Assassins. I don't care how. Just do it, and do it fast. Here's the message: the biggest contract offer of the Master's life will be waiting at the back wall of Lady Simtal's estate. Tonight. If the Guild Master's worthy of that name then maybe – just maybe – it's not too big for the Guild to handle. Deliver that message, even if you have to shout it from the rooftops, or I'm coming back here with killing in mind.'

Paran stared at his corporal, too tired to be amazed. 'We're wasting time,' he drawled.

Kalam tightened his grip and glared into Scurve's eyes. 'We'd better not be,' he growled. He released the man by gently lowering him on to the counter-top. Then he tossed a handful of silver coins beside Scurve. 'For your troubles,' he said.

Paran gestured and the assassin nodded. They left the Phoenix Inn.

'Still following orders, Corporal?'

Kalam grunted. 'We were instructed to make the offer in the name of the Empress, Captain. If the contract's accepted and the assassinations are done, then Laseen will have to pay up, whether we've been outlawed or not.'

'A gutted city for Dujek and his army to occupy, with the Empress paying for it. She'll choke on that, Kalam.'

He grinned. 'That's her problem, not mine.'

In the street, the Greyfaces moved through the noisy crowd like silent spectres, lighting the gas-lamps with long-poled sparkers. Some people, brazen with drink, hugged the figures and blessed them. The Greyfaces, hooded and anonymous, simply bowed in reply and continued on their way once freed.

Kalam stared at them, his brows knitting.

'Something the matter, Corporal?' Paran asked.

'Just something nagging me. Can't pin it down. Only, it's got to do with those Greyfaces.'

The captain shrugged. 'They keep the lanterns lit. Shall we make our way, then?'

Kalam sighed. 'Might as well, sir.'

The black lacquered carriage, drawn by two dun stallions, moved slowly through the press. A dozen feet ahead marched a brace of Baruk's own house guards, driving a wedge down the street's centre, using their wrapped weapons when shouts and curses failed.

In the plush confines of the carriage the outside roar surged and ebbed like a distant tide, muted by the alchemist's sound-deadening spells. He sat with his chin lowered on his chest, his eyes – hidden in the shadow of his brow and half-shut – studying the Tiste Andii seated across from him. Rake had said nothing since his return to the estate just minutes before their planned departure.

Baruk's head throbbed. Sorcery shook the hills to the east, sending waves of concussion that struck every mage within range like mailed fists. He well knew its source. The barrow dweller approached, its every step contested by Anomander Rake's Tiste Andii. It seemed that Mammot's prediction had been too generous. They didn't have days, they had hours.

Yet, despite the warring Warrens, despite the fact that the Jaghut Tyrant's power was superior to Rake's mages' – that the barrow dweller came on,

relentless, unstoppable, a growing storm of Omtose Phellack sorcery – the Lord of Moon's Spawn sat at ease on the padded couch, legs stretched out before him and gloved hands folded in his lap. The mask lying on the velvet at his side was exquisite, if ghastly. In better times Baruk might have been amused, appreciative of its workmanship, but right now when he regarded it his lone response was suspicion. A secret was locked in that mask, something that bespoke the man who would wear it. But the secret eluded Baruk.

Turban Orr adjusted his hawk mask and paused just before the wide steps leading to the estate's main doors. He heard another carriage arrive at the gates and turned. From the doorway at his back came the shuffle of footsteps.

Lady Simtal spoke behind him. 'I would rather you'd permitted one of my servants to inform me of your arrival, Councilman. Allow me the privilege of escorting you into the main chamber.' She slipped her arm through his.

'A moment,' he muttered, eyes on the figure now emerging from the carriage. 'It's the alchemist's carriage,' he said, 'but that's hardly Baruk, now, is it?'

Lady Simtal looked. 'Trake unleashed!' she gasped. 'Who would that be?'

'Baruk's guest,' Orr said drily.

Her grip bit into his arm. 'I'm aware of his privilege, Councilman. Tell me, have you seen this one before?'

The man shrugged. 'He's masked. How could I tell?'

'How many men do you know, Turban, who are seven feet tall and wear two-handed swords strapped to their backs?' She squinted. 'That white hair, do you think it's part of the mask?'

The councilman did not reply. He watched as Baruk emerged behind the stranger. The alchemist's mask was a conservative silver-inlaid half-shield that no more than covered his eyes. An obvious statement denying

duplicity. Turban Orr grunted, knowing well that his suspicions about the alchemist's influence and power were accurate. His eyes returned to the stranger. His mask was that of a black dragon, lacquered with fine silver-traced highlights; somehow the dragon's expression seemed ... sly.

'Well?' Lady Simtal demanded. 'Are we going to linger out here all night? And where's your dear wife, anyway?'

'Ill,' he said distractedly. He smiled at her. 'Shall we introduce ourselves to the alchemist's guest? And have I complimented you yet on your attire?'

'You haven't,' she said.

'A black panther suits you, Lady.'

'But of course it does,' she replied testily, as Baruk and his guest strode down the paved walk towards them. She disengaged her arm and stepped forward. 'Good evening, Alchemist Baruk. Welcome,' she added to the black-dragon-masked man. 'An astonishing presentation. Have we met?'

'Good evening, Lady Simtal,' Baruk said, bowing. 'Councilman Turban Orr. Permit me to introduce,' he hesitated, but the Tiste Andii had been firm on this, 'Lord Anomander Rake, a visitor to Darujhistan.' The alchemist waited to see if the councilman would recognize the name.

Turban Orr bowed formally. 'On behalf of the City Council, welcome, Lord Anomander Rake.'

Baruk sighed. Anomander Rake, a name known by poets and scholars, but not, it appeared, by councilmen.

Orr continued, 'As a lord, I assume you hold title to land?' He almost stepped back as the dragon's visage swung to regard him. Deep blue eyes fixed on his.

'Land? Yes, Councilman, I hold title. However, my title is honorary, presented to me by my people.' Rake looked past Orr's shoulder to the room beyond the wide doorway. 'It seems, Lady, that the evening is well under way.'

'Indeed.' She laughed. 'Come, join in the festivities.'

Baruk breathed another relieved sigh.

Murillio had to admit that Kruppe's choice of mask suited him perfectly. He found himself grinning behind his feather-decked peacock mask in spite of his trepidation. He stood near the opened doorway leading out to the patio and garden, a goblet of light wine in one hand, the other hitched in his belt.

Rallick leaned against the wall beside him, arms crossed. His mask was that of a Catlin tiger, idealized to mimic the god Trake's image. Murillio knew the assassin let the wall bear his weight out of exhaustion rather than from a lazy slouch. He wondered yet again if matters would fall to him. The assassin stiffened suddenly, eyes on the entrance across from them.

Murillio craned to see past the crowd. There, the hawk. He murmured, 'That's Turban Orr all right. Who's he with?'

'Simtal,' Rallick growled. 'And Baruk, and some monster of a man wearing a dragon's mask – and armed.'

'Baruk?' Murillio laughed nervously. 'Let's hope he doesn't recognize us. It wouldn't take him a second to put everything together.'

'It doesn't matter,' Rallick said. 'He won't stop us.'

'Maybe you're right.' Then Murillio almost dropped his glass. 'Hood's Weary Feet!'

Rallick hissed between his teeth. 'Dammit! Look at him! He's heading straight for them!'

Lady Simtal and Turban Orr excused themselves, leaving Baruk and Rake momentarily alone in the middle of the chamber. People moved around them, some nodding deferentially at Baruk but all keeping their distance. A crowd gathered around Simtal where she stood at the foot of the winding staircase, eager with questions regarding Anomander Rake.

A figure approached Baruk and his companion. Short, round, wearing a faded red waistcoat, both hands clutching pastries, the man wore a cherub's mask, its open red-lipped mouth smeared with cake icing and crumbs. His route to them met with one obstacle after another as he negotiated his way across the room, excusing himself at every turn and twist.

Rake noticed the newcomer, for he said, 'Seems eager, doesn't he?'

Baruk chuckled. 'He's worked for me,' he said. 'And I've worked for him as well. Anomander Rake, behold the one they call the Eel. Darujhistan's master-spy.'

'Do you jest?'

'No.'

Kruppe arrived, his chest heaving. 'Master Baruk!' he said breathlessly. 'What a surprise to find you here.' The cherub face swung over and up to Rake. 'The hair is an exquisite touch, sir. Exquisite. I am named Kruppe, sir. Kruppe the First.' He raised a pastry to his mouth and jammed it in.

'This is Lord Anomander Rake, Kruppe.'

Kruppe nodded vigorously, then swallowed audibly. 'Of course! Why, then, you must be quite used to such a lofty stance, sir. Kruppe envies those who can look down upon everyone else.'

'It is easy to fool oneself,' Rake answered, 'into viewing those beneath one as small and insignificant. The risks of oversight, you might say.'

'Kruppe might well say, assuming the pun was intended. But who would disagree that the dragon's lot is ever beyond the ken of mere humankind? Kruppe can only guess at the thrill of flight, the wail of high winds, the rabbits scurrying below as one's shadow brushes their limited awareness.'

'My dear Kruppe,' Baruk sighed, 'it is but a mask.'

'Such is the irony of life,' Kruppe proclaimed, raising one pastry-filled hand over his head, 'that one learns to distrust the obvious, surrendering instead to insidious suspicion and confused conclusion. But, lo, is Kruppe deceived? Can an eel swim? Hurrah, these seeming muddy waters are home

to Kruppe, and his eyes are wide with wonder!' He bowed with a flourish, spattering bits of cake over Rake and Baruk, then marched off, still talking. 'A survey of the kitchen is in order, Kruppe suspects ...'

'An eel indeed,' Rake said, in an amused tone. 'He is a lesson to us all, is he not?'

Agreed,' Baruk muttered, shoulders slumping. 'I need a drink. Let me get you one. Excuse me.'

Turban Orr stood with his back to the wall and surveyed the crowded room. He was finding it difficult to relax. The last week had been exhausting. He still awaited confirmation from the Assassins' Guild that Coll was dead. It wasn't like them to take so long to complete a contract, and sticking a knife into a drunk shouldn't have been too difficult.

His hunt for the spy in his organizations had reached a dead end, but he remained convinced that such a man – or woman – existed. Again and again, and especially since Lim's assassination, he'd found his moves in the Council blocked by countermoves, too unfocused for him to point a finger at any one person. But the proclamation was dead in the water.

He'd come to that conclusion this morning. And he'd acted. Even now his most trusted and capable messenger rode the trader's track, probably passing through the Gadrobi Hills and that thunderstorm at this very moment, on his way to Pale. To the Empire. Turban Orr knew the Malazans were on the way. No one in Darujhistan could stop them. And the Moon's lord had been defeated once, at Pale. Why would it be any different this time around? No, the time had come to ensure that his own position would survive the Empire's occupation. Or, better yet, an even higher rank to reward his vital support.

His eyes fell casually on a guard stationed to one side of the spiral staircase. The man looked familiar somehow – not his face, but the way he stood, the set of the shoulders. Was the man's usual station at Majesty Hall? No, the uniform was that of a regular, while Majesty Hall was the domain of the Elites. Turban Orr's frown deepened behind the hawk mask. Then the

guard adjusted his helmet strap, and Turban Orr gasped. He leaned back against the wall, overcome by trembling. Despot's Barbican! All those nights, night after night – for years – that guard had witnessed his midnight meetings with his allies and agents. There stood his spy.

He straightened, closing one hand over the pommel of his duelling sword. He'd leave no room for questions, and damn Simtal's sensibilities – and damn this party. He wanted his vengeance to be swift and immediate. He'd let no one stop him. His eyes fixing on the unsuspecting guard, Turban Orr stepped forward.

He collided with a hard shoulder and staggered back. A large man in a tiger mask turned to him. Orr waited for an apology, but received only silence. He moved to step past the man.

The stranger's arm intercepted him. Turban Orr cursed as a gloved hand poured wine down his chest. 'Idiot!' he snapped. 'I am Councilman Turban Orr! Out of my way.'

'I know who you are,' the man said quietly.

Orr jabbed a finger into the man's chest. 'Keep that mask on, so I'll know who to look for later.'

'I didn't even notice your mask,' the man said, his voice cold and flat. 'Fooled by the nose, I suppose.'

The councilman's eyes narrowed. 'Eager to die, are you?' he grated. 'I will oblige you.' His hand twitched on his sword's pommel. 'In a few minutes. Right now I have—'

'I wait on no man,' Rallick Nom said. 'And certainly not for some thin-lipped prancer pretending to manhood. If you've the belly for a duel, make it now or stop wasting time with all this talk.'

Shaking, Turban Orr took a step back and faced the man directly. 'What's your name?' he demanded hoarsely.

'You are not fit to hear it, Councilman.'

Turban Orr raised his hands and whirled to the crowd. 'Hear me, guests! Unexpected entertainment for you all!' Conversation died and everyone faced the councilman. He continued, 'A fool has challenged my honour, friends. And since when has Turban Orr permitted such an insult?'

A duel!' someone cried excitedly. Voices rose.

Orr pointed at Rallick Nom. 'This man, so bold as to wear Trake's face, will be dead shortly. Look upon him now, friends, as he looks upon you – and know that he is all but dead already.'

'Stop babbling,' Rallick drawled.

The councilman pulled the mask from his face, revealing a tight grin. 'If I could kill you a thousand times,' he said, 'it would not be enough to satisfy me. I must settle with you but once.'

Rallick removed his mask and tossed it on to the carpeted stairs. He looked upon Turban Orr with flat, dark eyes. 'Done breaking wind, Councilman?'

'Unmasked and still a stranger,' Orr said, scowling. 'So be it. Find yourself a second.' A thought struck him, and he turned back to the crowd, searching it. Towards the back he saw the mask he sought, that of a wolf. His choosing of a second could well have political benefits, assuming the man accepted. And, in this crowd, he'd be a fool to deny Orr. 'For myself,' he said loudly, 'I would be honoured if Councilman Estraysian D'Arle act as my second.'

The wolf started. Beside him stood two women, one no more than a girl. D'Arle's wife was dressed as a veiled woman of Callows, while the girl had selected – outrageously – the minimal garb of a Barghast warmaiden. Both wife and daughter spoke to Estraysian. He stepped forward. 'The honour is mine,' he rumbled, completing the ritual acceptance.

Turban Orr felt a surge of triumph. To have his most powerful enemy in the Council at his side for this duel would send a message mixed enough to panic half the Council members present. Pleased at his coup, he faced his nameless opponent again. 'And your second?'

Silence fell over the room.

'I haven't much time,' Lady Simtal said in a low voice. 'After all, as the hostess for this fête ...'

'It's your duty,' murmured the man before her, 'to satisfy your guests.' He reached forth and brushed the hair from her forehead. 'Which is something I'm certain you can do, and do well.'

She smiled and walked to the door. She locked its latch, then spun to face the man again. 'Perhaps half an hour,' she said.

The man strode to the bed and tossed down his leather gloves. 'I'm confident,' he said, 'that those thirty minutes will be satisfying indeed, each more than the last.'

Lady Simtal joined him beside the bed. 'I suppose,' she whispered, as she slipped her arms around the man's neck and drew his face down to her lips, 'that you've no choice now but to tell the Widow Lim the sad news.' She touched her lips to his, then ran her tongue along the line of his jaw.

'Mmm? What sad news is that?'

'Oh, that you've found yourself a more worthy lover, of course.' Her tongue reached into his ear. Abruptly she pulled back and met his eyes searchingly. 'Do you hear that?' she asked.

He brought his arms around her and drew her closer. 'Hear what?'

'That's just it,' she said. 'It's suddenly quiet downstairs. I'd better—'

'They're in the garden, no doubt,' the man said reassuringly. 'The minutes are passing, Lady.'

She hesitated, then made the mistake of letting him press his body against hers. Lady Simtal's eyes widened in near-alarm. Her breathing changed. 'So,' she gasped, 'what are we doing still dressed?'

'Good question,' Murillio growled, pulling both of them on to the bed.

In the silence following Turban Orr's question, Baruk found himself preparing to step forward. Knowing well what that would reveal, he felt compelled nevertheless. Rallick Nom was here to right a dreadful wrong. More, the man was a friend, closer to the alchemist than Kruppe or Murillio – and, in spite of his profession, a man of integrity. And Turban Orr was Lady Simtal's last link to real power. If Rallick killed the man, she'd fall.

Coil's return to the Council was something Baruk and his fellow T'orrud mages greatly desired. And Turban Orr's death would be a relief. More was riding on this duel than Rallick imagined. The alchemist adjusted his robe and drew a deep breath.

A large hand closed on his upper arm and, before Baruk could react, Lord Anomander Rake stepped forward. 'I offer my services as second,' he said loudly. He met Rallick's eyes.

The assassin betrayed nothing, not once looking at Baruk. He answered Rake's offer with a nod.

'Perhaps,' Turban Orr sneered, 'the two strangers know each other.'

'We've never met,' Rake said. 'However, I find myself instinctively sharing his distaste for your endless talk, Councilman. Thus I seek to avoid a Council debate on who will be this man's second. Shall we proceed?'

Turban Orr led the way out to the terrace, Estraysian D'Arle behind him. As Baruk turned to follow he felt a familiar contact of energies at his side. He swung his head and recoiled. 'Good gods, Mammot! Where did you get that hideous mask?'

The old man's eyes held his briefly then shied away. 'An accurate rendition of Jaghut features, I believe,' he said softly. 'Though I think the tusks are a little short.'

Baruk shook himself. 'Have you managed to find your nephew yet?'

'No,' Mammot replied. 'I am deeply worried by that.'

'Well,' the alchemist grunted as they walked outside, 'let's hope that Oponn's luck holds for the lad.'

'Of course,' Mammot murmured.

Whiskeyjack's eyes widened as a crowd of excited guests poured out from the main chamber and gathered on the terrace.

Fiddler scurried to his side. 'It's a duel, Sergeant. The guy with the wine stain on his shirt is one of them, a councilman named Orr. Nobody knows who the other man is. He's over there with that big man in the dragon mask.'

The sergeant had been leaning, arms crossed, against one of the marble pillars encircling the fountain, but at seeing the tall dragon-masked figure he came near to toppling into the fountain behind him. 'Hood's Balls!' he cursed. 'Recognize that long silver hair, Fid?'

The saboteur frowned.

'Moon's Spawn,' Whiskeyjack breathed. 'That's the mage, the Lord who stood on that portal and battled Tayschrenn.' He reeled off an impressive list of curses, then added, 'And he's not human.'

Fiddler groaned. 'Tiste Andii. The bastard's found us. We've had it.'

'Shut up.' Whiskeyjack was recovering from his shock. 'Line everybody up the way that Captain Stillis wanted us. Backs to the woods and hands on weapons. Move!'

Fiddler scrambled. The sergeant watched the saboteur round up his men. Where the hell were Kalam and Paran anyway? He caught Quick Ben's eye and gestured the mage over.

'Fid explained it,' Quick Ben said, leaning close. 'I may not be much use, Sergeant. That barrow-dweller's unleashing waves of nasty stuff. My head feels ready to explode.' He grinned wanly. 'And look around. You can pick out all the mages by the sick looks on their faces. If we all accessed our Warrens, we'd be fine.'

'Then why don't you?'

The wizard grimaced. 'That Jaghut would fix on us as if we were a beacon of fire. And he'd take the weaker ones – even from this distance, he'd take them. And then there'd be hell to pay.'

Whiskeyjack watched the guests create a space on the terrace, lining up on either side. 'Check with Hedge and Fiddler,' he ordered, eyes lingering on the Tiste Andii. 'Make sure they've got something handy, in case it all comes apart. This estate's got to burn then, hot and long. We'll need the diversion to set off the intersection mines. Give me the nod telling me they're up to it.'

'Right.' Quick Ben moved off.

Whiskeyjack grunted in surprise as a young man stepped round him, dressed as a thief, complete with face mask.

'Excuse me,' the man muttered, as he walked into the crowd.

The sergeant stared after him, then glanced back at the garden. How the hell had that lad got past them in the first place? He could've sworn they'd sealed off the woods. He loosened his sword surreptitiously in its sheath.

Crokus had no idea what kind of costume Challice D'Arle would be wearing, and he was resigned to a long hunt. He'd left Apsalar at the garden's back wall, and now felt guilty. Still, she'd seemed to take it well – though in a way that made him feel even worse. Why did she have to be so nice about things?

He spared barely a thought about the crowd's strange formation, looking as he was for a head somewhere at chest level to everyone else. As it turned out, that proved unnecessary, for Challice D'Arle's costume was no disguise.

Crokus found himself between two burly house guards. Across from him, twenty feet away with no one to block his view, stood Challice and an older woman Crokus took to be her mother. Their attention was held unerringly

on a tall, severe-looking man standing at one end of the cleared space and speaking with another man, who was strapping on a duelling glove. It slowly dawned on the thief that a duel was but moments away.

Squeezing between the two guards, Crokus craned his neck to find the other duellist. At first he thought him the giant with the dragon mask and two-handed sword. Then his gaze found the man. Rallick Nom. His eyes snapped back to the first duellist. Familiar. He nudged the guard on his left. 'Is that Councilman Turban Orr?'

'It is, sir,' the guard replied, an odd tightness in his tone.

Crokus glanced up to see the man's face wet with sweat, trickling down from under his peaked helmet. Strange. 'So, where's Lady Simtal?' he asked casually.

'Nowhere in sight,' the guard answered, with obvious relief. 'Otherwise she'd stop this.'

Crokus nodded at that. 'Well,' he said, 'Rallick will win.'

The guard's gaze was on him, the eyes hard and piercing. 'You know the man?'

'Well—'

Someone tapped his back and he turned to find a cherub's face smiling mindlessly at him. 'Why, Crokus lad! What an inventive costume you're wearing!'

'Kruppe?'

'Well guessed!' Kruppe replied. The painted wooden face swung to the guard. 'Oh, kind sir, I have a written message for you.' Kruppe placed a scroll into the man's hand. 'Compliments of a long-time secret admirer.'

Crokus grinned. These guards had all the luck when it came to noble ladies.

Circle Breaker accepted the scroll and slid from it the silk tie.

More than once he had sensed Turban Orr's eyes on him. First in the central chamber, when it looked as if the councilman might accost him directly, and now, while others argued over who should referee the duel.

Circle Breaker prayed Rallick would kill Turban Orr. He felt his own fear racing through his body, and it was with trembling hands that he read the Eel's message.

> *The time has come for Circle Breaker to retire from active duty. The circle is mended, loyal friend. Though you have never seen the Eel, you have been his most trusted hand, and you have earned your rest. Think not that the Eel simply discards you now. Such is not the Eel's way. The sigil at the bottom of this parchment will provide you passage to the city of Dhavran, where loyal servants of the Eel have prepared your arrival by purchasing an estate and a legitimate title on your behalf. You enter a different world soon, with its own games.*
>
> *Trust your new servants, friend, in this and all other concerns.*
>
> *Proceed, this very night, to the Dhavran trader's pier in Lakefront. You seek the river longboat named Enskalader. Show the sigil to any crewman aboard – all are* servants *of the Eel. The time has come, Circle Breaker. The circle is mended. Fare you well.*

Baruk threw up his hands in exasperation. 'Enough of this!' he bellowed. 'I will referee this duel, and accept all responsibility. Judgement of victory is mine. Accepted by both parties?'

Turban Orr nodded. Even better than Estraysian being his second. Baruk's proclaiming him victor in the duel would be a coup in its own right. 'I accept.'

'As do I,' Rallick said, his short cloak drawn about his body.

A sudden wind thrashed the treetops in the garden, sweeping down from the east. Thunder boomed from this side of the hills. A number of onlookers seemed to flinch. Turban On-grinned, stepping into the cleared area. Leaves skirled past, clattering like tiny bones. 'Before it rains,' he said.

His allies in the crowd laughed at this. 'Of course,' Orr continued, 'it might prove more entertaining to draw things out. A wound here, a wound there. Shall I cut him to pieces slowly?' He feigned dismay at the chorus of eager assent. 'Too eager for blood, friends! Must the ladies dance on slick flagstones once darkness falls? We must consider our host ...' And where *was* Simtal? His imagination conjured an image in answer and he frowned. 'No indeed,' he said coldly, 'it shall be quick.'

The councilman unsheathed his sword and fastened his glove's leather straps to the ornate grip behind the bell guard. He scanned the faces of his audience, even now seeking some betrayal of expression – he had friends who were enemies, enemies who would be friends, the game would continue beyond this moment, but it could prove a telling moment. He would recall every face later, and study it at his leisure.

Turban Orr assumed his stance. His opponent stood ten feet away, both hands hidden beneath his cloak. He looked at ease, almost bored. 'What's this?' Orr demanded. 'Where is your weapon?'

'I'm ready,' Rallick replied.

Baruk placed himself equidistant between the two duellists, slightly off to one side. His face was pale, as if he had fallen ill. 'Comments from the seconds?' he asked faintly.

Rake made no reply.

Estraysian D'Arle cleared his throat. 'I hereby make it known that I oppose this duel as facile and trite.' He stared at Turban Orr. 'I find the councilman's life irrelevant in the best of times. Should he die,' the tall man looked over to Rallick, 'there will be no vengeance pact from the House of D'Arle. You, sir, are freed of that.'

Rallick bowed.

Turban Orr's smile tightened. The bastard would pay for that, he vowed. He lowered himself into a crouch, ready to launch an attack as soon as the duel began.

Baruk said, 'You have been heard, Estraysian D'Arle.' The alchemist raised a handkerchief before him, then released it.

Turban Orr jumped forward and lunged in a single, fluid motion, so fast he'd fully extended his weapon before the handkerchief struck the paving stones. He saw his opponent's left hand dart under his blade, then twist up and outward, a short, curved knife flashing in its grip. The parry was a blur, yet Orr caught it and deftly disengaged, driving his point low and towards the man's mid-section. He had no time even to notice the second knife, as Rallick turned his body sideways, the blade in his right hand guiding Turban Orr's sword past him. The assassin stepped in then, his left hand moving in a high swing that buried its blade in the councilman's neck. Rallick followed this by driving his other knife into Orr's chest.

The councilman staggered to one side, his sword clanging on the stones as he clutched at the gushing wound in his neck. The motion was reflex, for he was already dead from the wound in his heart. He toppled.

Rallick stepped back, weapons once again hidden beneath his cloak. 'A thousand other deaths,' he whispered, so low that only Baruk and Rake heard him, 'would not have satisfied me. But I'll settle for this one.'

Baruk stepped close and made to speak, but then, at a gesture from Rake, he turned to see Estraysian D'Arle approaching.

The councilman's heavy eyes held Rallick. 'I might suspect,' he said, 'given your style, that we have witnessed an assassination. Of course, not even the Guild of Assassins is brash enough to commit public murder. Therefore I've no choice but to keep such suspicions to myself. And leave it at that. Good evening, gentlemen.' He whirled and strode away.

'I think,' Rake said, his masked face swinging to the assassin, 'that that was a rather uneven match.'

A rush of people closed in around Turban Orr's body. Voices shouted in dismay.

Baruk studied the cool satisfaction on Rallick's face. 'It's done, Rallick. Go home.'

A large, rounded woman in a bright green, gold-trimmed robe joined them. Unmasked, she smiled broadly at Baruk. 'Greetings,' she said. 'Interesting times, yes?' A personal servant stood at her side, bearing a padded tray on which squatted a water-pipe.

Rallick stepped back with a slight bow, then left.

Baruk sighed. 'Greetings, Derudan. Permit me to introduce Lord Anomander Rake. Lord, the witch Derudan.'

'Forgive the mask,' Rake said to her. 'It is best that it remain on, however.'

Smoke streamed down from Derudan's nose. 'My compatriots share my growing unease, yes? We feel the approaching storm, and while Baruk continues to reassure us, still the misgivings, yes?'

'Should it prove necessary,' Rake said, 'I will attend to the matter personally. I do not believe, however, that our greatest threat is the one beyond the city's walls. A suspicion, Witch, no more.'

'I think,' Baruk said tentatively, 'that we would like to hear these suspicions of yours, Rake.'

The Tiste Andii hesitated, then shook his head. 'Unwise. The matter is presently too sensitive to be broached. I shall remain here for now, however.'

Derudan waved dismissively at Baruk's angry growl. 'True, the T'orrud Cabal is unused to feeling helpless, yes? True also, dangers abound, and any might prove a feint, a diversion, yes? Cunning is the Empress. For myself, I affirm the trust between us, Lord.' She smiled at Baruk. 'We must speak, you and I, Alchemist,' she said, linking arms with him.

Rake bowed to the woman. 'A pleasure meeting you, Witch.' He watched the witch and the alchemist walk away, the servant scurrying at Derudan's

heel.

Kruppe intercepted a servant burdened with delicious-looking savouries. Taking two handfuls at random, he turned back to resume his conversation with Crokus. He stopped. The lad was nowhere in sight.

The crowd milled about on the terrace, some upset although the majority appeared simply confused. Where was Lady Simtal? they asked. Some, grinning, changed the question to: Who's she with? Already a new wave of anticipation rose among the nobles. They circled like vultures, waiting for their faltering hostess.

Smiling beatifically behind the cherub mask, Kruppe raised his eyes slowly to the balcony overlooking the patio, in time to see a figure appear as a dark, feminine silhouette behind the shutters. He licked sticky sugar from his fingers, smacking his lips. 'There are times, Kruppe murmurs, when celibacy born of sad deprivation becomes a boon, nay, a source of great relief. Dear Murillio, prepare for a storm.'

Simtal pushed apart two slats of the shutters and looked down. 'You were right,' she said. 'They have indeed retired to the terrace. Odd, with that storm coming. I should get dressed.' She returned to the bed and began to collect her clothing, which lay scattered all around it. 'And what about you, Murillio?' she asked. 'Don't you think your companion below is wondering where you are, dear lover?'

Murillio swung his legs over the bedside and pulled on his tights. 'I think not,' he said.

Simtal shot him a curious look. 'Who did you come with?'

'Just a friend,' he answered, buttoning his shirt. 'I doubt you'd recognize the name.'

At that moment the door's lock snapped and the door itself slammed inward.

Dressed only in her underclothes, Simtal loosed a startled cry. Her eyes flashed at the tall, cloaked man standing in the doorway. 'How dare you enter my bedroom? Leave at once, or I'll call—'

'Both guards patrolling this hallway have departed, Lady,' Rallick Nom said, stepping into the room and closing the door behind him. The assassin glanced at Murillio. 'Get dressed,' he snapped.

'Departed?' Simtal moved to place the bed between herself and Rallick.

'Their loyalty has been purchased,' the assassin said. 'The lesson shouldn't be lost on you.'

'I need only scream and others will come.'

'But you haven't,' Rallick grinned, 'because you're curious.'

'You don't dare harm me,' Simtal said, straightening. 'Turban Orr will hunt you down.'

The assassin took another step forward. 'I'm here only to talk, Lady Simtal,' he said. 'You won't be harmed, no matter what you deserve.'

'Deserve? I've done nothing – I don't even know you.'

'Neither did Councilman Lim,' Rallick said quietly. 'And tonight the same could be said for Turban Orr. Both men paid for their ignorance, alas. Fortunate that you missed the duel, Lady. It was unpleasant, but necessary.' His eyes hardened on the pale woman. 'Allow me to explain. Turban Orr's offer of contract to the Assassins' Guild is now officially cancelled. Coll lives, and now his return to this house is assured. You're done with, Lady Simtal. Turban Orr is dead.'

He turned and walked from the room, closing the door behind him.

Murillio rose slowly. He looked into Simtal's eyes, seeing there a growing terror. Undermined by the stripping away of her links to power, her once secure defences collapsed. He watched as she seemed physically to contract, her shoulders drawing inward, her hands clasped at her stomach, knees bending. Then he could look no longer. The Lady Simtal was gone, and he dared not study too closely the creature in her place.

He unsheathed his ornamental dagger and tossed it on the bed. Without another word or gesture, he left the room, knowing with certainty that he would have been the last man to see her alive.

Out in the hallway he paused. 'Mowri,' he said softly. 'I'm not cut out for this.' Planning to reach this point was one thing; having now reached it was another. He hadn't considered how he'd feel. Justice got in the way of that, a white fire he'd had no reason to look behind, or push aside. Justice had seduced him and he wondered what he had just lost, he wondered at the death he felt spreading within him. The regret following in that death's wake, so unanswerable it was, threatened to overwhelm him. 'Mowri,' he whispered a second time, as close to praying as he'd ever been, 'I think I'm now lost. Am I lost?'

Crokus edged round a marble pillar, his eyes on the rather short Barghast warmaiden sitting on the fountain's rim. Damn those guards at the wood's edge, anyway. He was a thief, wasn't he? Besides, they all looked pretty distracted.

He waited for his opportunity, and when it came he darted for the shadows between the first line of trees. No shout of alarm or call to halt sounded behind him. Slipping into the darkness, Crokus turned and crouched. Yes, she still sat there, facing in his direction.

He drew a deep breath, then stood straight, a pebble in one hand. Eyeing the guards, he waited. Half a minute later he found his chance. He stepped forward and flung the pebble into the fountain.

Challice D'Arle jumped, then looked round as she wiped droplets of water from her painted face.

His heart sank as her gaze passed over him, then her head whipped back.

Crokus gestured desperately. This was it, this was when he'd find out where she stood as far as he was concerned. He held his breath and gestured again.

With a backward glance towards the patio, Challice rose and ran to him.

As she came close she squinted at him. 'Gorlas? Is that you? I've been waiting all night!'

Crokus froze. Then, without thinking, he lunged forward and clasped a hand over her mouth, his other arm encircling her waist. Challice squealed, trying to bite his palm, and struggled against him, but he dragged her into the darkness of the garden. Now what? he wondered.

Circle Breaker leaned against the marble pillar just inside the estate's main chamber. Behind him guests milled around Turban Orr's body, arguing loudly and voicing empty threats. The air hung heavy over the garden, smelling of blood.

He wiped at his eyes, trying to calm his heart. It's *over. Queen of Dreams, I'm done. 1 can rest now. Finally rest.* He straightened slowly, taking a deep breath, adjusted his sword belt and glanced around. Captain Stillis was nowhere in sight, and the chamber was almost empty except for a knot of servants outside the kitchen entrance. Lady Simtal was still missing, and confusion now seeped into the void of her absence.

Circle Breaker looked one last time at the guests in the garden, then he made his way to the doors. As he passed a long table on which sat the remnants of pastries and puddings, he heard faint snoring. Another step forward brought him to the table's end and into view the small round man seated in a plush antique chair. The smeared cherub mask hid the man's face, but Circle Breaker could see the closed eyes, and the nasal drone that matched the rise and fall of his chest was loud and steady.

The guardsman hesitated. Then, shaking his head, he moved on. Beyond the gates now within sight waited the streets of Darujhistan, and freedom. Now that he'd begun his first steps on that path, he would let nothing deter him.

I've done my part. Just another nameless stranger who couldn't run from the face of tyranny. Dear Hood, take the man's shrivelled soul – his dreams are over, ended by an assassin's whim. As for my own soul, well, you shall have to wait a while longer.

He passed through the gates, welcoming at last the smile that came unbidden to his mouth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ravens! Great Ravens!
Your damning cawls deride
histories sweeping beneath
your blackened wings –

    Shatter the day
    O flags of night,
    rend with shadows
    this innocent light

Ravens! Great Ravens!
Your drumming clouds arrive
swoop'd sudden sheer,
hissing travails
from no place
t' the other –

    Shatter the day,
    O flags of night,
    rend with shadows
    this innocent light

Ravens! Great Ravens!
Your beaks clatter open
disgorging the sweat
of straining dismay
the clack of bones
promised this day –

I've seen the sheen
of your eyes the laughter
that rimes the living
your passing but an illusion –

we stop, we stare
we curse your cold winds
in knowing your flight's path
wheeling you round us
again, oh, for ever again!

Ravens Collitt (b.978)

Raest had driven two of the black dragons from the battle. The remaining two now circled high overhead while Silanah Redwings sped down and out of sight beyond the hill. She was hurting, the Jaghut Tyrant knew, the power of her immense lifeforce bleeding away.

'And now,' he said, through tattered lips, 'she will die.' Raest's flesh had been torn away, ravaged by the virulent power of the dragons, power that burst from their jaws like breath of fire. His brittle, yellowed bones were splintered, crushed and shattered. All that kept him upright and moving was his Omtose Phellack Warren.

Once the Finnest was in his hands, he would make his body anew, filling it with the vigour of health. And he was near his goal. One last ridge of hills and the city's walls would be visible, its fortifications all that stood between Raest and his greater powers.

The battle had laid waste to the hills, incinerating everything in the deadly clash of Warrens. And Raest had driven back the dragons. He'd listened to their cries of pain. Laughing, he'd flung dense clouds of earth and stone skyward to blind them. He ignited the air in the path of their flight. He filled clouds with fire. It was, he felt, good to be alive again.

As he walked, he continued to devastate the land around him. A single jerk of his head had shattered a stone bridge spanning a wide, shallow river. There had been a guardhouse there, and soldiers with iron weapons – odd creatures, taller than Imass, yet he sensed that they could be easily enslaved. These particular men, however, he destroyed lest they distract him in his battle with the dragons. He'd met another man, similarly clad and riding a horse. He killed both man and beast, irritated at their intrusion.

Wreathed in the crackling fire of his sorcery, Raest ascended the side of the hill behind which Silanah had disappeared minutes earlier. Anticipating another ambush, the Jaghut Tyrant gathered his power, fists clenching. Yet he reached the crest unmolested. Had she fled? He craned skyward. No, the two black dragons remained, and between them a Great Raven.

Raest crossed the hill's summit and stopped when the valley beyond came into view. Silanah waited there, her red pebbled skin streaked with black, wet burns across her heaving chest. Wings folded, she watched him from her position at the base of the valley, where a stream wound a tortured cut through the earth, its jagged path choked with bramble.

The Jaghut Tyrant laughed harshly. Here she would die. The far side of the valley was a low ridge, and beyond, glowing in the darkness, was the city that held his Finnest. Raest paused at seeing it. Even the great Jaghut cities of the early times were dwarfed by comparison. And what of its strange blue and green light, fighting the darkness with such steady, unfaltering determination?

There were mysteries here. He was eager to discover them. 'Silanah!' he cried. *'Eleint!* I give you your life! Flee now, Silanah. I show mercy but once. Hear me, *eleint!'*

The red dragon regarded him steadily, her multi-faceted eyes glowing like beacons. She did not move, nor did she reply.

Raest strode towards her, surprised to find her Warren gone. Was this surrender, then? He laughed a second time.

As he neared, the sky above him changed, filling with a sourceless mercurial glow. The city beyond vanished, replaced by wind-whipped mudflats. The distant jagged line of mountains loomed massive, uncarved by rivers of ice, bright and savage with youth. Raest's steps slowed. This *is an Elder vision, a vision before even the Jaghut. Who has lured me here?*

'Oh, my, oh, my ...'

The Tyrant's gaze snapped down to find a mortal standing before him. Raest cocked a withered brow at the man's peculiar clothing, the coat

tattered and faded red with large, food-stained cuffs, the baggy shimmering pantaloons dyed an astonishing pink, and the broad black leather boots covering his small feet. The man withdrew a cloth and patted the sweat from his brow. 'Dear sir,' he wheezed, 'you've not aged well at all!'

'There is Imass within you,' Raest rasped. 'Even the language you speak echoes their guttural throats. Have you come forth to grovel at my feet? Are you my first acolyte, then, eager for my rewards?'

'Alas,' the man replied, 'you are mistaken, sir. Kruppe – this humble, weak mortal who stands before you – bows to no man, be he Jaghut or god. Such are the nuances of this new age that you are felled by indifference, made insignificant in your mighty struggles by lowly Kruppe into whose dream you have ignobly stumbled. Kruppe stands before you so that you may gaze upon his benign countenance in the last moments before your demise. Magnanimous of Kruppe, all things considered.'

Raest laughed. 'I have walked in the dreams of mortals before. You believe you are the master here, but you are mistaken.' The Tyrant's hand shot out, virulent power erupting from it. The sorcery engulfed Kruppe, blazing darkly, then faded, leaving not even a remnant of the man.

A voice spoke to Raest's left: 'Rude, Kruppe proclaims. Disappointing, this precipitateness.'

The Jaghut swung around, eyes narrowing. 'What game is this?'

The man smiled. 'Why, Kruppe's game, of course.'

A sound behind Raest alerted him, but too late. He spun – even as a massive flint sword crunched through his left shoulder, tearing a path that snapped ribs, sliced through sternum and spine. The blow dragged the Tyrant down and to one side. Raest sprawled, pieces of his body striking the ground around him. He stared up at the T'lan Imass.

Kruppe's shadow moved over Raest's face and the Tyrant met the mortal man's watery eyes.

'He is Clanless, of course. Unbound and beyond binding, yet the ancient call commands him still – to his dismay. Imagine his surprise at being found

out. Onos T'oolan, Sword of the First Empire, is once more called upon by the blood that once warmed his limbs, his heart, his life of so very long ago.'

The T'lan Imass spoke. 'You have strange dreams, mortal.'

'Kruppe possesses many surprises, even unto himself.'

'I sense,' Onos T'oolan continued, 'a Bone Caster's hand in this summoning.'

'Indeed. Pran Chole of Kig Aven's clan of the Kron T'lan Imass, I believe he called himself.'

Raest raised himself from the ground, drawing his sorcery around his body to hold its shattered parts in place. 'No T'lan Imass can withstand me,' he hissed.

'A dubious claim,' Kruppe said. 'Even so, he is joined in this endeavour.'

The Jaghut Tyrant straightened to see a tall, black-shrouded figure emerge from the streambed. He cocked his head as the apparition approached. 'You remind me of Hood. Is the Death Wanderer still alive?' He scowled. 'But, no. I sense nothing from you. You do not exist.'

'Perhaps,' the figure replied, in a deep, soft tone that hinted of regret. 'If so,' he continued, 'then neither do you. We are both of the past, Jaghut.' The figure halted fifteen feet away from Raest and swung his hooded head in the dragon's direction. 'Her master awaits your arrival, Jaghut, but he waits in vain and for this you should thank us. He would deliver a kind of death from which there is no escape, even by such a creature as you.' The head turned, and the darkness within the hood once again regarded the Tyrant. 'Here, within a mortal's dream, we bring an end to your existence.'

Raest grunted. 'In this age there are none who can defeat me.'

The figure laughed, a low rumble. 'You are a fool, Raest. In this age even a mortal can kill you. The tide of enslavement has reversed itself. It is now we gods who are the slaves, and the mortals our masters – though they know it not.'

'You are a god, then?' Raest's scowl deepened. 'You are a child to me if so.'

'I was once a god,' the figure replied. 'Worshipped as K'rul, and my aspect was the Obilisk. I am the Maker of Paths – do you find significance in that ancient title?'

Raest took a step back, raising his desiccated hands. 'Impossible,' he breathed. 'You passed into the Realms of Chaos – returned to the place of your birth – you are among us no more—'

'As I said, things have changed,' K'rul said quietly. 'You have a choice, Raest. Onos T'oolan can destroy you. You have no understanding of what his title of Sword signifies – he is without equal in this world. You can fall ignobly beneath the blade of an Imass, or you can accompany me – for in one thing we are the same, you and I. Our time has passed, and the Gates of Chaos await us. What choice do you make?'

'I make neither, Eldering One.' With a soft, hollow laugh, Raest's battered, withered body collapsed.

K'rul cocked his head. 'He's found another body.' Kruppe pulled out his handkerchief. 'Oh, my,' he said.

Kalam gestured sharply and Paran ducked down. The captain's mouth was dry. There was something very wrong with this garden. He wondered if it was simply the exhaustion he felt. The garden's air itself rubbed his senses raw. He thought he could see the darkness pulse, and the smell of decay had thickened to a stench.

Kalam reached for his knives. Paran tensed, unable to see anything beyond the assassin. Too many trees, not enough light. Somewhere ahead flickered gas-lamps, and people were gathered on the terrace. But civilization seemed a thousand leagues away. Here, the captain felt as if he was within a primordial presence, breathing slowly and heavily on all sides.

Kalam gestured that Paran remain where he was, then slipped into the shadows to their right. Crouching low, the captain edged forward to where

the assassin had been standing moments earlier. There looked to be a glade, or clearing, just ahead. He couldn't be certain, however, nor could he see anything amiss. Yet his feeling of wrongness now ached in his skull. He took another step. Something occupied the glade's centre, blockish, like a dressed stone, or an altar, and before it stood a small woman, almost wraith-like in the darkness. Her back was to Paran.

One moment she stood alone, the next Kalam rose behind her, knives glimmering in his hands. He drew back his arms.

The woman moved in a blur, one elbow driving backwards into the assassin's stomach. She twisted round and drove her knee into the man's crotch. A shout burst from Kalam as he reeled back a step, then fell to the ground with a heavy thump.

Paran's sword was in his hand. He dashed into the clearing.

The woman saw him and voiced a surprised, frightened yelp. 'No!' she cried. 'Please!'

The captain stopped at that girlish voice. Kalam sat up. He groaned, then said, 'Dammit, Sorry. Wasn't expecting you. We figured you were dead, girl.'

The woman eyed Paran warily as he approached cautiously. 'I should know you, shouldn't I?' she asked Kalam. Then, as Paran came closer, she raised a frightened hand between them and stepped back. 'I – I killed you!' With a soft moan she fell to her knees. 'Your blood was on my hands. I remember it!'

A fire of rage flared in Paran. He raised his sword and moved to stand over her.

'Wait!' Kalam hissed. 'Wait, Captain. Something's not right here.'

With great difficulty, the assassin climbed to his feet, then prepared to sit down on the stone block.

'Don't!' the girl gasped. 'Can't you feel it?'

'I can,' Paran growled. He lowered his weapon. 'Don't touch that thing, Corporal.'

Kalam stepped away. 'Thought it was just me,' he muttered.

'It's not stone at all,' the woman said, her face free of the anguish that had twisted it a moment before. 'It's wood.' She rose and faced Kalam. 'And it's growing.'

A suspicion came to Paran. 'Girl, do you remember me? Do you know who I am?'

She frowned at him, then shook her head. 'I know Kalam,' she said. 'He's an old friend, I think.'

The assassin choked on something, then coughed loudly, wagging his head.

The woman pointed at the wooden block. 'See? It's growing again.'

Both men looked. A haze blurred the block's edges, swelling and shifting, then vanished, yet it was clear to Paran that the thing was now bigger.

'It has roots,' the woman added.

Paran shook himself. 'Corporal? Remain here with the girl. I won't be long.' He sheathed his sword and left the glade. After winding through the undergrowth for a minute, he came to its edge and looked out on a terrace crowded with guests. A low-walled fountain rose from the paving stones to his left, encircled by marble pillars spaced about a yard apart.

The captain saw that Whiskeyjack and the squad had arrayed themselves in a rough line a dozen feet from the garden's edge, facing the terrace. They looked tense. Paran found a dead branch and snapped it in half.

At the sound all six men turned. The captain pointed at Whiskeyjack and Mallet, then stepped back between the trees. The sergeant whispered something to Quick Ben. Then he collected the healer and they came over.

Paran pulled Whiskeyjack close. 'Kalam's found Sorry, and something else besides,' he said. 'The girl's not all there, Sergeant, and I don't think it's

an act. One minute she remembers killing me, the next she doesn't. And she's got it into her head right now that Kalam's an old friend.'

Mallet grunted.

After a brief glance back at the party, Whiskeyjack asked, 'So what's this "something else"?'

'I'm not sure, but it's ugly.'

'All right.' The sergeant sighed. 'Go with the captain, Mallet. Take a look at Sorry. Any contact from the Assassins' Guild yet?' he asked Paran.

'No.'

'Then we move soon,' Whiskeyjack said. 'We let Fiddler and Hedge loose. Bring Kalam when you come back, Mallet. We need to talk.'

Rallick found his path unobstructed as he moved across the central chamber towards the front doors. Faces turned to him and conversations fell away, rising again as he passed. A bone-deep weariness gripped the assassin, more than could be accounted for by the blood lost to a wound already healed. The malaise gripping him was emotional.

He paused at seeing Kruppe rising from a chair, mask dangling from one plump hand. The man's face was sheathed in sweat and there was fear in his eyes.

'You've a right to be terrified,' Rallick said, approaching him. 'If I'd known you'd be here—'

'Silence!' Kruppe snapped. 'Kruppe must think!'

The assassin scowled but said nothing. He'd never before seen Kruppe without his usual affable façade, and the sight of him so perturbed made Rallick profoundly uneasy.

'Be on your way, friend,' Kruppe said then, his voice sounding strange. 'Your destiny awaits you. More, it seems this new world is well prepared for one such as Raest, no matter what flesh he wears.'

Rallick's scowl deepened. *The man sounds drunk.* He sighed, then turned away, his mind returning once again to what had been achieved this night. He continued on his way, leaving Kruppe behind. What now? he wondered. So much had gone into reaching this moment. The sharp focus of his thoughts seemed dulled now by success. Never the crusader, Rallick's obsession to right the wrong had been, in a sense, no more than the assassin assuming the role Coll himself should have taken. He'd played the instrument of Coil's will, relying on a faith that the man's own will would return.

And if it didn't? His scowl deepening, Rallick crushed that question before it could lead his thought in search of an answer. As Baruk had said, the time had come to go home.

As he passed a silver-masked woman touched his arm. Startled by the contact, he turned to look at her. Long brown hair surrounded the featureless mask, its eyehole slits revealing nothing of what lay behind it. The woman stepped close. 'I've been curious,' she said quietly, 'for some time. However, I see now I should have observed you personally, Rallick Nom. Ocelot's death could have been avoided.'

The assassin's gaze darkened. 'Vorcan.'

Her head tilted in a fraction of a nod.

'Ocelot was a fool,' Rallick snapped. 'If Orr's contract was sanctioned by the Guild, I await punishment.'

She did not reply.

Rallick waited calmly.

'You're a man of few words, Rallick Nom.'

His answer was silence.

Vorcan laughed softly. 'You say you await punishment, as if already resigned to your own death.' Her gaze shifted from him towards the crowded terrace. 'Councilman Turban Orr possessed protective magic, yet it

availed him naught. Curious.' She seemed to be considering something, then she nodded. 'Your skills are required, Rallick Nom. Accompany me.'

He blinked, then, as she strode towards the garden at the rear of the house, he followed.

Crokus held one hand over Challice's mouth as he lay atop her. With his other he removed his thief's mask. Her eyes widened in recognition. 'If you scream,' Crokus warned in a harsh voice, 'you'll regret it.'

He'd managed to drag her perhaps ten yards into the undergrowth before she tripped him. They'd thrashed about, but he'd won the battle.

'I just want to talk to you,' Crokus said. 'I won't hurt you, Challice, I swear it. Unless you try something, of course. Now, I'm going to remove my hand. Please don't scream.' He tried to read the expression in her eyes, but all he saw was fear. Ashamed, he raised his hand.

She didn't scream, and a moment later Crokus found himself wishing she had. 'Damn you, thief! When my father catches you he'll have you skinned alive! That's if Gorlas doesn't find you first. You try anything with me and he'll have you boiled, slowly—'

Crokus jammed his hand over her mouth again. Skinned? Boiled? 'Who's Gorlas?' he demanded, glaring. 'Some amateur chef? So you did betray me!'

She stared up at him.

He lifted his hand again.

'I didn't betray you,' she said. 'What are you talking about?'

'That murdered house guard. I never did it, but—'

'Of course you didn't. Father hired a Seer. A woman killed that guard, a servant of the Rope's. The Seer was terrified and didn't even stay to be paid! Now get off me, thief.'

He let her go and sat back on the ground. He stared into the trees. 'You didn't betray me? What about Meese? The guards at Uncle Mammot's? The

big hunt?'

Challice climbed to her feet and brushed dead leaves from her hide cloak. 'What are you babbling about? I have to get back. Gorlas will be looking for me. He's the first son of House Tholius, in training to be a master duellist. If he sees you with me, there'll be real trouble.'

He looked up at her blankly. 'Wait!' He sprang to his feet. 'Listen, Challice! Forget this Gorlas idiot. Within the year my uncle will introduce us formally. Mammot is a famous writer.'

Challice rolled her eyes. 'Get your feet back on the ground. A writer? Some old man with ink-stained hands who walks into walls – has his house power? Influence? House Tholius has power, influence, everything required. Besides, Gorlas loves me.'

'But I—' He stopped, looking away. Did he? No. Did that matter, though? What did he want from her, anyway?

'What do you want from me, anyway?' Challice demanded.

He studied his feet. Then he met her eyes. 'Company?' he asked diffidently. 'Friendship? What am I saying? I'm a thief! I rob women like you!'

'That's right,' she snapped. 'So why pretend otherwise?' Her expression softened. 'Crokus, I won't betray you. It will be our secret.'

For the briefest of moments he felt like a child being stroked and consoled by a kindly matron, and he found himself enjoying it.

'Before you,' she added, smiling, 'I'd never met a real thief from the streets.'

His enjoyment ended in a surge of anger. 'Hood's Breath, no,' he sneered. 'Real? You don't know what's real, Challice. You've never had blood on your hands. You've never seen a man die. But that's the way it should be, isn't it? Leave the dirt to us, we're used to it.'

'I saw a man die tonight,' Challice said quietly. 'I never want to again. If that's what "real" means, then I don't want it. It's all yours, Crokus.

Goodbye.' She turned and walked away.

Crokus stared at her back, her braided hair, as her words rang in his head.

Suddenly exhausted, he turned to the garden. He hoped Apsalar had remained where he'd left her. The last thing he wanted now was to have to track her down. He slipped into the shadows.

Mallet recoiled with his first step into the glade. Paran gripped his arm. Their eyes met.

The healer shook his head. 'I'll not approach any closer, sir. Whatever lives there is anathema to my Denul Warren. And it ... it senses me ... with hunger.' He wiped sweat from his brow, drew a shaky breath. 'Best bring the girl to me here.'

Paran released his arm and darted into the clearing. The block of wood was now the size of a table, veined in thick, twisting roots and pocked on its sides with rough squared holes. The earth around it looked soaked in blood. 'Corporal,' he whispered, chilled. 'Send the girl over to Mallet.'

Kalam laid a hand on her shoulder. 'It's all right, lass,' he said, in the tone of a kindly uncle, 'you go on, now. We'll join you shortly.'

'Yes,' she smiled, and moved to where the healer stood at the glade's edge.

Kalam rubbed his bristly jaw, eyes following her. 'Never seen Sorry smile before,' he said, as Paran arrived. 'And that's a shame.'

They stood and watched as Mallet spoke quietly to the girl, then stepped forward and laid a hand on her forehead.

Paran cocked his head. 'The storm's stopped,' he said.

'Yeah. Hope it means what we'd like it to mean.'

'Someone's stopped it. I share your hope, Corporal.' For the captain however, it was a small hope. Something was building. He sighed. 'It's not even the twelfth bell yet. Hard to believe.'

'Long night ahead of us,' the assassin said, making it clear that he, too, found himself sorely lacking in optimism. He grunted. Mallet had voiced an amazed cry that reached them. The healer drew back his hand and waved at Paran and Kalam. 'You go,' the assassin said.

The captain frowned at the black man, confused. Then he went over to where the healer and Sorry waited. The girl's eyes were closed, and she seemed in a trance.

Mallet was direct. 'The possession's gone,' he said.

'Guessed as much,' Paran replied, eyeing the girl.

'There's more to it, though,' the healer continued. 'She's got someone else inside her, sir.'

Paran's brows rose.

'Someone who was there all along. How it survived the Rope's presence is beyond me. And now I've got a choice.'

'Explain.'

Mallet crouched, found a twig and began to scratch aimless patterns in the dirt. 'That someone's been protecting the girl's mind, acting like an alchemist's filter. In the last two years, Sorry's done things that would drive her insane if she'd remembered any of it. That presence is fighting those memories right now, but it needs help, because it isn't as strong as it once was. It's dying.'

Paran squatted beside the man. 'You're thinking of offering that help, then?'

'Not sure. You see, sir, I don't know its plans. Don't know what it's up to, can't read the pattern it's trying to make. So let's say I help it, only what it wants is absolute control? Then the girl's possessed all over again.'

'So you think the presence was protecting Sorry from the Rope, only so it could now jump in and take over?'

'Put it that way,' Mallet said, 'and it doesn't make sense. What gets me, though, is why else would that presence commit itself so thoroughly? Its body, its flesh is gone. If it lets go of the girl it's got nowhere to go, sir. Now, maybe it's a loved one, a relative or something like that. A person who was willing to sacrifice herself absolutely. That's a possibility.'

'Herself? It's a woman?'

'It was. Damned if I know what it is now. All I get from it is sadness.' The healer met Paran's eyes. 'It's the saddest thing I've ever known, sir.'

Paran studied the man's face briefly, then he rose. 'I'm not going to give you an order on what to do, Healer.'

'But?'

'But, for what it's worth, I say do it. Give it what it needs so it can do what it wants to do.'

Mallet puffed out his cheeks, then tossed down the twig and straightened. 'My instinct, too, sir. Thanks.'

Kalam spoke loudly from the glade. 'Far enough. Show yourselves.'

The two men spun around to see Kalam looking into the woods to their left. Paran grasped Mallet's arm and pulled him into the shadows. The healer dragged Sorry with them.

Two figures entered the glade, a woman and a man.

Crokus snaked closer through the vines and mulch of the forest floor. For an off-limits garden, this was a busy tangle of wood. The voices he'd heard in his search for Apsalar now revealed themselves as two men and one silver-masked woman. All three were looking at an odd, blurry tree stump in the centre of the glade. Slowly Crokus let out a breath. One of the men was Rallick Nom.

'There is ill in this,' the woman said, stepping back. 'A hunger.'

The large black-skinned man at her side grunted. 'Wouldn't argue with you on that, Guild Master. Whatever it is, it ain't Malazan.'

The thief's eyes widened. Malazan *spies? Guild Master? Vorcan!* Seemingly impervious to the strangeness around her, the woman now turned to Rallick. 'How does it affect you, Rallick?'

'It doesn't,' he said.

'Approach it, then.'

The assassin shrugged and walked up to the writhing, knotted block. Its blurred movement stopped.

Vorcan relaxed. 'You seem to damage its efforts, Rallick. Curious.'

The man grunted. 'Otataral dust.'

'What?'

'I rubbed it into my skin.'

Vorcan stared.

The other man's eyes narrowed on Rallick. 'I remember you, Assassin. Our quarry when we first sought to make contact. The night of the ambush from above.'

Rallick nodded.

'Well,' the Malazan continued, 'I'm surprised you survived.'

'He is a man of many surprises,' Vorcan said. 'Very well, Corporal Kalam of the Bridgeburners, your request for an audience reached me and I have granted it. Before we begin, however, I would appreciate it if the rest of your party were to join us.' She turned to the trees on her right.

Crokus's head was already reeling – Bridgeburners! – but it felt moments away from bursting when he saw two men emerge from the shadows, with Apsalar between them. She looked drugged, and her eyes were closed.

One of the men said, 'Guild Master, I am Captain Paran of the Ninth Squad.' He drew a deep breath, then continued, 'In this matter, however,

Kalam speaks for the Empire.'

Vorcan turned back to the black man. 'Then the audience is begun.'

'We both know, Guild Master, that the City Council is not Darujhistan's true power base. And since you're not, either, we've concluded that the city's mages operate covertly, keeping the status quo intact being their overriding interest. Whoever they are, they're good at hiding themselves. Now, we might just decide to kill every mage in Darujhistan, but that would take too long, and it might prove messy. Instead, Guild Master, the Malazan Empire has issued a contract on Darujhistan's true rulers. One hundred thousand gold jakatas. Each. More, the Empress offers the mantle of the city's control, accompanied with the title High First and all the privileges that come with it.' He crossed his arms.

Vorcan was silent, then she said, 'Empress Laseen is willing to pay nine hundred thousand jakatas to me?'

'If that's the number. Yes,' Kalam agreed.

'The T'orrud Cabal is a powerful force, Corporal. But before I answer, I would know of the creature who approaches from the east.' Her face tightened fractionally. 'Five dragons opposed it for a time, presumably hailing from Moon's Spawn. I assume that Master Baruk and his Cabal have sealed an agreement with the Son of Darkness.'

Kalam looked stunned, then recovered quickly. 'Guild Master, the approaching force was not of our making. We'd welcome its destruction at the hands of the Son of Darkness. As for your hidden question, I would assume that the alliance between the Tiste Andii and the Cabal will become void with the death of the cabal's members. We're not asking you to try to kill the Lord of Moon's Spawn.'

Paran cleared his throat. 'Guild Master, Moon's Spawn and the Malazan Empire have clashed before. The pattern indicates that the Son of Darkness is likely to retreat rather than stand against us alone.'

'Accurate,' Vorcan agreed. 'Corporal Kalam, I have no wish to waste the lives of my assassins on such an effort. Only an assassin who is a High

Mage could hope to succeed. Therefore, I accept the contract. I will conduct the assassinations. Now, as to the matter of payment ...'

'Delivered by Warren upon completion of the contract,' Kalam said. 'You may know this already, Guild Master, but the Empress was once an assassin. She abides by the rules of conduct. The gold shall be paid. The title and rule of Darujhistan given without hesitation.'

'Accepted, Corporal Kalam.' Vorcan turned to Rallick. 'I begin immediately. Rallick Nom, the task I now give you is vital. I have considered your strange ability to negate the growth of this ... ill thing. My instincts are such: it must not be permitted to continue growing. You will remain here, thus holding it in stasis.'

'For how long?' he growled.

'Until my return. At that time I will test its defences. Oh, and one more thing: Ocelot's actions were not sanctioned by the Guild. Executing him fulfilled the Guild's judgement as to fit punishment. Thank you, Rallick Nom. The Guild is pleased.'

Rallick walked over to the strange stump and sat down on it.

'Until later,' Vorcan said, and strode from the glade.

Crokus watched as the three Malazan spies gathered for a whispered discussion. Then one of the men grasped Apsalar's arm and gently guided her into the woods, making for the rear wall. The remaining two, Captain Paran and Corporal Kalam, glanced over at Rallick.

The assassin's head was in his hands, his elbows on his thighs, staring gloomily at the ground.

Kalam hissed a sigh through his teeth and shook his head. A moment later both men left, in the direction of the terrace.

Crokus hesitated, a part of him wanting to rush into the glade and confront Rallick. *Assassinate the mages! Hand Darujhistan to the Malazans?* How could the man allow such a thing to happen? He did not move, however, a fear growing inside him that he, in truth, knew nothing of

this man. Would the assassin listen to him? Or would he answer Crokus with a knife in the throat? Crokus didn't feel like taking the chance.

In the last minute Rallick had not moved. Then he rose, turned directly to where Crokus lay hidden.

The thief groaned.

Rallick beckoned.

Slowly, Crokus approached.

'You hide well,' Rallick said. 'And you were lucky Vorcan kept her mask on – she couldn't see much out of it. You heard, then?'

Crokus nodded, his eyes drawn to what he'd called a tree stump in spite of himself. It looked more like a small wooden house. The pocks on its sides could well have been windows. Unlike Vorcan, he sensed not hunger but a kind of urgency, almost frustration.

'Before you condemn me, listen carefully, Crokus.'

The thief dragged his attention from the wooden block. 'I'm listening.'

'Baruk may yet be at the party. You must find him, tell him exactly what's happened. Tell him Vorcan is a High Mage – and she'll kill them all unless they gather to defend each other.' The assassin reached out a hand to Crokus's shoulder. The boy flinched, his eyes wary. 'And if Baruk has gone home, find Mammot. I saw him here not long ago. He wears the mask of a tusked beast.'

'Uncle Mammot? But he's—'

'He's a High Priest of D'riss, Crokus, and a member of the T'orrud Cabal. Now, hurry. There's no time to waste.'

'You mean you're going to stay here, Rallick? Just sit there on that ... that stump?'

The assassin's grip tightened. 'Vorcan spoke true, lad. Whatever this thing is, it seems I can hold it in check. Baruk needs to know of this conjuring. I trust his senses more than I do Vorcan's, but for now I will obey her in this.'

For a moment Crokus resisted, his thoughts on Apsalar. They'd done something to her, he was certain – and if they'd harmed her, he'd make them pay. But ... Uncle Mammot? Vorcan was planning to kill his uncle? The thief's eyes hardened as he looked up at Rallick. 'Consider it done,' he said.

At that instant, a roar of rage and agony, coming from the terrace, shook the trees. The block of wood behind them responded with a burst of bright yellow fire, its roots writhing and swelling like groping fingers.

Rallick pushed Crokus hard then whirled and dived on to the block. The yellow fire winked out and cracks opened in the earth, spreading in all directions. 'Go!' yelled Rallick.

The thief, his heart hammering, turned and sprinted for Lady Simtal's estate.

Baruk's hand snapped out and yanked savagely on the bell cord. Above him, he heard the wagoner cry out. The carriage skidded to a halt. 'Something's happened,' he hissed to Rake. 'We left too early, dammit!' He moved on the seat to the window and opened its shutters.

'A moment, Alchemist,' Rake said levelly, his brows knitted and his head cocked as if listening for something. 'The Tyrant,' he pronounced. 'But he is weakened, and enough mages remain to deal with him.' He opened his mouth to add something, then shut it again. His eyes deepened to azure as he studied the alchemist. 'Baruk,' he said quietly, 'return to your estate. Prepare for the Empire's next move – we'll not have long to wait.'

Baruk stared at the Tiste Andii. 'Tell me what's happening,' he said angrily. 'Will you challenge the Tyrant or not?'

Rake tossed his mask on to the floor between them and clasped the collar of his cloak. 'If it proves necessary, I shall.'

Fists pounded on the carriage and voices shouted good-naturedly. The crowds around them pushed in on all sides, rocking the carriage. The festival approached the Twelfth Bell, the Hour of Ascension as the Lady of Spring took to the sky in the coming of the moon.

Rake continued, 'In the meantime the city's streets must be cleared,' he said. 'I imagine it's your desire to minimize the loss of life.'

'And this is all you give me, Rake?' Baruk gestured sharply. 'Clear the streets? How in Hood's name do we manage that? There are three hundred thousand people in Darujhistan, and they're *all* in the streets!'

The Tiste Andii opened the door beside him. 'Then leave that to me. I need to find a high vantage-point, Alchemist. Suggestions?'

Baruk's frustration was so great that he had to fight the desire to defy Anomander Rake. 'K'rul's Belfry,' he said. 'A square tower near Worry Gate.'

Rake stepped out of the carriage. 'We'll speak again at your estate, Alchemist,' he said, leaning back inside. 'You and your fellow mages must prepare yourselves.' He faced the crowds, pausing for a moment as if smelling the air. 'How far to this belfry?'

'Three hundred paces – surely you don't mean to go on foot?'

'I do. I am not yet ready to unveil my Warren.'

'But how—?' Baruk fell silent, as Anomander Rake provided the answer to his question.

Standing head and shoulders above the jostling crowds, he unsheathed his sword. 'If you value your souls,' the Son of Darkness bellowed, 'make way!' Raised high, the sword groaned awake, chains of smoke writhing from the blade. A terrible sound as of wheels creaking filled the air and behind it arose a chorus of moaning filled with hopelessness. Before Lord Anomander Rake the crowd in the street shrank back, all thoughts of festivity swept away.

'Gods forfend!' Baruk whispered.

It had begun innocently enough. Quick Ben and Whiskeyjack stood together near the fountain. Servants scurried as, despite the night's

bloodshed and the hostess's absence, the party's energy burgeoned anew as the twelfth bell approached. They were joined by Captain Paran.

'We have met with the Guild Master,' he said. 'She has accepted the contract.'

Whiskeyjack grunted. 'Where would we all be without greed?'

'I just noticed something,' Quick Ben said. 'My headache's gone. I'm tempted to access my Warren, Sergeant. See what I can see.'

Whiskeyjack thought briefly. 'Go ahead.'

Quick Ben stepped back into the shadow of a marble pillar.

Before them, an old man wearing a ghastly mask drifted towards Whiskeyjack's line of men. Then a large, buxom woman with a water-pipe approached the old man. Her servant followed half a step behind. Trailing smoke as she walked, she called to the old man.

The next moment the night was shattered as a wave of energy flowed like a stream of water between Whiskeyjack and Paran, striking the old man in the chest. The sergeant's sword was in his hand as he turned to find his wizard, magic swirling from him, pushing him to one side and racing for the woman. 'No!' Quick Ben screamed. 'Stay away from him!'

Paran, too, had unsheathed his sword in his hand, the blade keening as if filled with terror. He sprinted forward.

A bestial roar of rage shook the air as the old man, his mask torn away, whirled. His burning eyes found the woman and he flung a hand towards her. The surge of power that streamed from him was as grey as slate, crackling in the air.

Whiskeyjack, frozen, watched in disbelief as Quick Ben's body hurled into the woman's. Both collided with the servant and all three went down in a heap. The writhing stream of energy cut a swath through the stunned crowd, incinerating everyone it touched. Where men and women had stood a moment earlier there was nothing but white ash. The attack branched out, ripping through everything in sight. Trees disintegrated, stone and marble

exploded in clouds of dust. People died, some with parts of their body simply gone, blood spraying in black flecks as they crumpled. A lance of energy shot wildly skyward, flashing in the night sky within a heavy cloud. Another struck the estate with a rattling boom. A third snaked towards Paran as he closed the gap between him and the old man. The power struck the sword, and it and Paran vanished.

The sergeant took a half-step forward, then something hard and massive struck a glancing blow to his shoulder. He was spun round, his right knee buckling inward as he fell.

He felt the snap of bone, then the meaty tearing of flesh and skin as his weight bore him down. His sword clanged. Agony lancing through him, he rolled to free his pinned leg, and came up against a toppled pillar.

An instant later hands grasped his cloak. 'I got you!' Fiddler grunted.

Whiskeyjack bellowed in pain as the saboteur dragged him across the paving-stones. Then darkness swept in around him and he knew no more.

Quick Ben found himself buried beneath flesh, and for a second he could not breathe. Then the woman's hands pressed down on his shoulders and she pushed herself off him. She shouted at the old man.

'Mammot! *Anikaleth araest!'*

Quick Ben's eyes widened as he sensed the wave of power rise through her body. The air suddenly smelled of deep forest loam.

'Araest!' she yelled, and the power burst from her in a virulent pulse.

Quick Ben heard Mammot's scream of pain.

'Attend, Wizard!' the woman said. 'He is Jaghut-possessed.'

'I know,' he growled, rolling on to his stomach then climbing to his hands and knees. A quick glance showed Mammot on the ground, waving a feeble hand. The wizard's gaze flicked to where Whiskeyjack had been. The pillars around the fountain had toppled, and the sergeant was nowhere in sight. In fact, he realized, none of the squad was visible. On the terrace crumpled bodies lay in grotesque piles, none moving. Everyone else had fled.

'Mammot recovers,' the woman said desperately. 'I have nothing left, Wizard. You must do something now, yes?'

He stared at her.

Paran stumbled, slid across greasy clay and rolled up against a bank of tufted reeds. A storm racked the sky above him. He scrambled to his feet, the sword Chance hot and moaning in his hand. A calm shallow lake stretched out on his left, ending in a distant ridge of faintly luminescent green. To his right the marshes continued out to the horizon. The air was cool, sweet with decay.

Paran sighed shakily. He studied the storm overhead. Jagged arcs of lightning warred with each other, the clouds dark and twisting as if in agony. A concussion sounded to his right and he spun. A thousand paces away, something had appeared. The captain squinted. It rose above the marsh grasses like an animated tree, gnarled and black, pulling at the roots that gripped it and flinging them aside. Another figure appeared, danced lithely around it, a brown-bladed jagged sword in its hands. This figure was clearly in retreat, as the gnarled man-shape lashed at it with miasmic waves of power. They were approaching Paran's position.

He heard bubbling, sucking sounds behind him and turned. 'Hood's Breath!'

A house was rising out of the lake. Swamp grass and mud slid from its battered stone walls. A huge stone doorway gaped black, hissing with steam. The second level of the structure looked misshapen, scarred, the cut stones melted away here and there, revealing a skeletal wooden frame.

Another explosion drew his attention back to the fighters. They were much closer now, and Paran could see the figure with the two-handed sword clearly. A T'lan Imass. Despite its awesome skill with the chalcedony weapon in its hands it was being driven back. Its attacker was a tall, lean creature with flesh like oak. Two gleaming tusks rose from its lower jaw, and it was shrieking with rage. It struck the T'lan Imass again, flinging the

warrior fifteen paces, to roll through the muck and come to rest almost at Paran's feet.

The captain found himself staring down into depthless eyes.

'The Azath is not yet ready, mortal,' the T'lan Imass said. 'Too young, not yet of strength to imprison that which called it into being – the Finnest. When the Tyrant fled, I sought out its power.' It tried to rise, failed. 'Defend the Azath, the Finnest seeks to destroy it.'

Paran looked up to see the apparition stalking towards him. *Defend?* Against that? The choice was taken from him. The Finnest roared and a sizzling wave of power rolled towards him. He swung Chance into its path.

The blade slid through the energy. Unaffected, the power swept over, then into Paran. Blinded, he screamed as bitter cold lanced through him, shattering his thoughts, his sense of self. An invisible hand closed around his soul. *Mine!* The word rang in his head, triumphant and filled with savage glee. *You are mine!*

Paran dropped Chance, fell to his knees. The grip on his soul was absolute. He could only obey. Fragments of awareness reached through. A *tool, nothing more. All I have done, all* I *have survived, to reach but this.*

Deep within him he heard a sound, repeating again and again, growing louder. A *howl.* The chill of his blood that had seamlessly filled every part of his body began to break apart. Flashes of heat, bestial and defiant, ripped through the cold. He threw back his head, the howling reaching his throat. As it broke loose, the Finnest staggered back.

Blood *of a Hound! Blood no one can enslave* – Paran launched himself at the Finnest. His muscles filled with pain as overwhelming strength flowed into them. *You dare!* He struck the creature, driving it to the ground, battering its oak flesh with his fists, sinking his teeth into the bark of its face. The Finnest tried to push him away, and failed. It screamed, flailing its limbs. Paran began ripping it methodically to pieces.

A hand closed on the collar of his cloak, pulled him from the tattered body. Frenzied, Paran tried to twist round, to rend the creature holding him.

The T'lan Imass shook him. 'Cease!'

The captain blinked.

'Cease! You cannot destroy the Finnest. But you have held it. Long enough. The Azath will take it now. Do you understand?'

Paran sagged, the fires within him ebbing. Glancing down at the Finnest, he saw roots and fibrous tendrils rising from the wet earth to wrap themselves around the battered apparition and begin to pull their captive down into the cloying mud. In a moment, the Finnest was gone.

The T'lan Imass released Paran and stepped back. It regarded him steadily for a long moment.

Paran spat blood and splinters from his mouth, wiped his lips with the back of a hand. He bent down and retrieved Chance. 'Damned luck turned,' he mumbled, sheathing the weapon. 'Do you have something to say, Imass?'

'You are a long way from home, mortal.'

Paran reappeared a moment later, staggering half-blind across the terrace, then collapsing in a heap. Quick Ben scowled. *What in Hood's Breath happened to him?*

A Jaghut curse escaped Mammot, fierce as if ripped from the soul. The old man regained his feet, trembling with rage. Then his hooded eyes were on the wizard.

'Awaken the Seven within me!' Quick Ben roared, then shrieked as seven Warrens opened within him. His agonized scream rode the cascading waves of power as they swept across the terrace.

The Jaghut Possessed threw up his arms before his face as the waves struck. Mammot's body withered beneath the clambering, frenzied attack. Flesh was ripped away, fires lancing, boring holes through him. He was driven to his knees, a vortex swirling like madness around him. Mammot howled, raising a fist that was nothing but charred bone. The fist spasmed and one of Quick Ben's Warrens slammed shut. The fist jerked again.

Quick Ben sagged. 'I'm done.'

Derudan grabbed a handful of the wizard's cloak. 'Wizard! Listen to me!'

Another Warren was driven away. Quick Ben shook his head. 'I'm done.'

'Listen! That man – the one over there – what's he doing?'

Quick Ben looked up. 'Hood's Breath!' he yelled, in sudden terror. A dozen paces away crouched Hedge, only his head and shoulders showing behind a bench. The saboteur's eyes shone with a manic glaze that the wizard recognized, and a large, bulky arbalest was in his hands, pointed directly at Mammot.

A wordless, wailing scream came from Hedge.

The wizard shouted and dived for the woman a second time. As he flew through the air, he heard the *thock* of the saboteur's crossbow. Quick Ben closed his eyes before colliding once again with the woman.

Crone flew tight circles over the plain where the Jaghut Tyrant had been. He had reached to within fifty paces of Silanah, then vanished. Not a flight through a Warren, but a vanishing more complete, more absolute and all the more fascinating for that.

It had been a glorious night, a battle worthy of remembrance, and its end proved no end at all. 'Delicious mystery,' she cackled. Crone knew her presence was demanded elsewhere, but she was reluctant to leave. 'Such terrible energies I have witnessed.' She laughed. 'I mock the waste, the sheer foolishness! Ah, and now all that remains is questions, questions!'

She craned her head upward. Her lord's two Tiste Andii Soletaken remained overhead. No one wanted to leave before the truth of the Jaghut Tyrant's fate was revealed. They'd earned the right to witness it, though Crone was beginning to suspect such answers would never come.

Silanah loosed a keening cry, then rose from the ground, the Warren that birthed her flight a strong, pungent exhalation. The red dragon's head swung westward, and she voiced a second cry.

With a mad flap of wings, Crone brought her descent under control, then skirted the tattered ground. She climbed skyward again, and saw what Silanah had seen. Crone shrieked in joy and anticipation – and surprise. 'And now it comes! It comes!'

As he shut his eyes, Quick Ben collapsed the last of his Warrens. The woman's arms closed around him as he struck her. She grunted loudly and collapsed beneath his momentum.

The detonation snatched the air from his lungs. The stones under them jumped and a flash of fire and flying masonry filled their world to the exclusion of all else. Then everything was still.

Quick Ben sat up. He looked to where Mammot had been standing. The paving stones were gone, and a wide, deep, steaming hole now yawned near the shattered fountain. The old man was nowhere in sight.

'Dear wizard,' the woman murmured beneath him. 'We live?'

Quick Ben glanced down at her. 'You'd closed your Warren. Very clever.'

'Closed, yes, but not by choice. Why clever?'

'Moranth munitions are mundane weapons, Witch. Opened Warrens draw their explosive force. That Tyrant is dead. Obliterated.'

And then Hedge was beside them, his leather cap half blown away and flash-burns covering one side of his face. 'You all right?' he gasped.

The wizard reached out and cuffed the man. 'You idiot! How many times have I—?'

'He's dead, ain't he?' Hedge retorted, hurt. 'Just a smouldering hole in the ground – best way to deal with mages right?'

They saw Captain Paran rise shakily from the rubble-strewn terrace. He scanned the scene, his gaze finding the wizard. 'Where is Whiskeyjack?' he demanded.

'In the woods,' Hedge answered.

Paran stumbled in that direction.

'Big help he was,' Hedge muttered.

'Quick!'

The wizard turned to see Kalam approach. The assassin paused as he skirted the edge of the crater, then he said. 'Something's moving down there.'

Paling, Quick Ben rose, then helped the witch to her feet.

They approached the crater. 'Impossible,' the wizard breathed. A man-shaped form had coalesced at the base of the pit. 'We're dead. Or worse.'

Thrashing from the garden drew their attention. The three froze as strangely blurred roots broke free of the undergrowth and snaked hungrily towards the crater.

The Jaghut Possessed straightened, spreading grey, swirling arms.

The roots closed around the creature. It shrieked in sudden terror. *'Azath edieirmarn! No! You've taken my Firnnest — but leave me! Phase!'* Tendrils clambered in a frenzy, entwining its limbs. The Omtose Phellack power writhed in a panicked effort to escape, to no avail. The roots pulled the apparition down, then dragged it screaming into the garden.

'Azath?' Quick Ben whispered. 'Here?'

'None, I would swear,' Derudan said, her face white. 'It's said they arise—'

'Where unchained power threatens life,' the wizard finished.

'I know where it is,' Kalam said. 'Quick Ben, will that Jaghut escape?'

'No.'

'So we're done with it. What of the Azath?'

Quick Ben hugged himself. 'Leave it, Kalam.'

'I must leave,' Derudan said hastily. 'Again, my gratitude for twice saving my life.'

They watched her rush away.

Fiddler joined them, looking distracted. 'Mallet's tending to the sergeant,' he said, closing the straps on a bulky bag he carried. 'We're off, then.' He nudged Hedge. 'Got a city to blow.'

'Whiskeyjack's hurt?' Quick Ben asked.

'Broken leg,' Fiddler answered. 'Pretty bad.'

At a surprised cry from Derudan, who had gone to the opposite side of the fountain, they all turned. She'd walked on to a black-clad youth, who must have been crouching behind the fountain's stone wall. Darting like a rabbit, the boy leaped the fountain and raced towards the estate.

'What do you think he heard?' Fiddler wondered.

'Nothing that would mean much to him,' said Quick Ben, recalling their conversation. 'You and Hedge going to do the deed?'

'Sky high.' Fiddler grinned.

The two saboteurs checked their equipment one last time, then turned to the patio.

Meanwhile, Kalam stood glowering into the pit. Ancient copper water-pipes streamed water down its ragged sides. For some reason a memory of the Greyfaces flashed into his head. The assassin crouched, seeing one pipe that leaked no water. He sniffed the air, then lay flat on the ground and reached down to lay his hand over the pipe's broken end. 'Assert,' he breathed.

He rolled and gained his feet, then asked Quick Ben, 'Where are they?'

The wizard's expression was blank. 'Who?'

Kalam roared, 'The saboteurs, dammit!'

'Just left,' Quick Ben replied, bemused. 'Through the estate.'

'To the back wall, soldier,' the assassin snapped. 'Find the others – Paran's taken command. Tell him to pull out. Find a place I know. I'll meet you

there.'

'Where are you going?'

'After the saboteurs.' Kalam wiped sweat from his face. 'Pull out the city map when you can, Quick Ben.' The assassin's eyes were tight with fear. 'Check the legend on it. We've planted mines at every major intersection. It's the main valves – don't you see?' He waved an arm. 'The Greyfaces! The gas, Quick Ben!'

Kalam whirled and crossed the patio. A moment later he disappeared into the estate house.

Quick Ben stared after him. The gas? His eyes widened. 'We'll all go sky high,' he whispered. 'The whole damn city!'

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was said
she turned the blade on herself then
to steal the magic
of life.

Call to Shadow (IX. ii)
Felisin (b.1146)

Exhausted, Paran made his way through the undergrowth. He ducked beneath a tree into shadow – and the world shifted.

Jaws closed on his left shoulder, teeth grinding through chain, and lifted him from the ground. A surge of unseen muscle flung him through the air. He landed heavily, rolled to his knees and looked up in time to see the Hound close once again. Paran's left arm was numb; he reached vainly for his sword as the Hound opened its maw and closed it around his chest. Mail popped, flesh tore and blood sprayed as the Hound lifted Paran once again.

The captain hung in the giant beast's mouth. He felt Chance slide free of its scabbard, its weight pulling it away from his twitching hand. The Hound shook him. Blood spattered the ground. Then it dropped him and stepped back, looking almost baffled. It whined, began to pace back and forth, eyes darting again and again to the captain.

Pain surged through Paran in growing waves; his limbs shook uncontrollably, he could barely draw breath.

'It seems Rood must find someone to blame,' a voice said. Paran blinked, opened his eyes to see a black-cowled man standing above him. 'But he was premature, and for that I apologize. Evidently, some old scores need settling between you and the Hounds.' The man frowned at Rood. 'More, something has confused him about you ... Kinship? Now, how could that be?'

'You were the one,' Paran said, as numbness spread through him, 'the one who possessed the girl—'

The man faced the captain. 'Yes, I am Cotillion. Shadowthrone regrets leaving you outside Hood's Gates – at the cost of two Hounds. Do you realize that those precious creatures had lived for a thousand years? Do you realize that no man – mortal or Ascendant – has ever before killed a Hound?'

Did I *save their souls?* Wouldn't *telling that story matter? No, too much like begging.* Paran glanced at Rood. *Kinship?* 'What do you want from me?' he asked Cotillion. 'My death? Leave me here, then, it's almost done.'

'You should have left us to our work, Captain, since you now hate the Empress so.'

'What you did to the girl—'

'What I did was merciful. I used her, yes, but she knew it not. Can the same be said for you? Tell me, is knowing you're being used better than not knowing?'

Paran said nothing.

'I can release to the girl all those memories, if you like. The memories of what I did, what she did, when I possessed her ...'

'No.'

Cotillion nodded.

Paran could feel the pain returning and it surprised him. He'd lost so much blood that he'd expected to be fading from consciousness by now. Instead, the pain was back, incessant, throbbing amid unbearable itching. He coughed. 'Now what?'

'Now?' Cotillion seemed surprised. 'Now I start again.'

'Another girl like her?'

'No, the plan was flawed.'

'You stole her life!'

Cotillion's dark eyes hardened. 'Now she has it back. I see you still carry Chance, so the same cannot be said for you.'

Paran turned his head, found the weapon an arm's length away. 'When my luck turns,' he muttered. *And turn it did.* He found he could move his left arm, and the pain in his chest seemed less insistent than it had.

Cotillion laughed drily at Paran's words. 'It will be too late then, Captain. You gamble that the Lady continues to look kindly on you. You've surrendered whatever wisdom you may have once possessed. Such is the power of the Twins.'

'I am healing,' Paran said.

'So you are. As I said, Rood was premature.'

The captain slowly, cautiously, sat up. His chain armour was in shreds, but beneath he could see the red flame of newly healed flesh. 'I – I don't understand you, Cotillion, or Shadowthrone.'

'You are not alone in that. Now, as to Chance ...'

Paran looked down at the weapon. 'It's yours, if you want it.'

'Ah.' Cotillion smiled, stepping over to pick it up. 'I'd suspected a change of heart, Captain. The world is so complex, isn't it? Tell me, do you pity the ones who used you?'

Paran closed his eyes. A terrible burden seemed to drain from him. He recalled the Finnest's grip on his soul. He glanced up at the Hound. In Rood's eyes he saw something almost... soft. 'No.'

'Wisdom returns quickly,' Cotillion said, 'once the bond is severed. I will return you now, Captain, with this one last warning: try not to be noticed. And when next you see a Hound, run.'

The air swirled into darkness around Paran. He blinked, saw the trees of the estate garden rising before him. I *wonder, will* I *run from it ... or with it?*

'Captain?' It was Mallet's voice. 'Where in Hood's Name are you?'

Paran sat up. 'Not in Hood's Name, Mallet. I'm here, in the shadows.'

The healer scrambled to his side. 'We've got trouble everywhere. You look —'

'Deal with it,' the captain barked, climbing to his feet.

Mallet stared at Paran. 'Hood's Breath, you look chewed to pieces ... sir.'

'I'm going after Lorn. If we all live through this we will meet at the Phoenix Inn. Understood?'

Mallet blinked. 'Yes, sir.'

Paran turned to leave.

'Captain?'

'What?'

'Don't treat her kindly, sir.'

Paran moved off.

The images remained with Crokus, brutally sharp. They returned again and again even as he tried to move away from them, his thoughts driven by panic and desperation.

Uncle Mammot was dead. In the youth's head a distant, steady voice told him that the man who had borne Mammot's face was not the man he'd known all his life, and that what had been ... claimed by the roots was something else, something horrific. The voice repeated this, and he heard its clear statement rising and falling beneath the storm of what he had seen with his own eyes: the images that would not leave him.

The central chamber of Lady Simtal's estate was abandoned, the fête's trappings scattered about on the floor amid puddles and smears of blood. The dead and those whom Mammot had hurt had been carried away by the guards; the servants had all fled.

Crokus raced across the room to the open front doors. Beyond, torchlight cast a hissing blue glow down on to the walkway's paved stones and the gates, which had been left ajar. The thief leaped down the steps and hurried for the gate. He slowed as he approached it, for something was wrong in the street.

Like Simtal's main floor, the street was empty, littered with pennants, banners and fetishes. Eddies of dry wind whipped tatters of cloth and reed paper about in dancing circles. The air felt heavy and close.

Crokus emerged on to the street. In either direction, as far as he could see, not a single reveller was visible, and a thick silence hung over all. The wind curled round him, first from one direction, then from another, as if seeking escape. A charnel smell filled the air.

Mammot's death returned to him. He felt utterly alone, yet Rallick's words urged him on. Days ago, the assassin had closed angry hands on the thief's shirt, pulling him close – and he'd called Crokus a drinker of the city's blood. He wanted to refute that, especially now. Darujhistan mattered. It was his home, and it mattered.

He turned in the direction of Baruk's estate. At least, with the streets empty, this wouldn't take long. He began to run.

The gusting wind beat against him, whipping his hair into his face. Darkness hung low above the street's gas lamps. Crokus skidded to a halt on a corner. He'd heard something. Cocking his head, he held his breath and listened. There, again. Birds – hundreds of them from the sound, murmuring, talking, clucking. And amid the charnel smell he now detected the reek of birds' nests. Crokus frowned, thinking. Then he looked directly overhead.

A shout broke from his lips and he ducked instinctively. Above him, blotting out the night sky's stars, was a ceiling of jagged black stone, hanging so low as to seem inches from the highest buildings. He stared up at it, then pulled away his gaze as a wave of dizziness spun through him. The ceiling was revolving slowly. In its pocks, shelves and crags he'd seen

the restless motion of nesting ravens, oily blots against the grainy background.

Moon's Spawn had arrived, to clear the streets, to silence the festival of rebirth. What could it mean? Crokus didn't know, but Baruk would. Of course.

The thief resumed his run, his moccasins a whisper on the cobbles.

Kruppe took an expansive breath, his eyes bright as he surveyed the hastily abandoned leavings in the kitchen. 'Always the way of things.' He sighed, patting his stomach. 'Ever and anon, Kruppe's dreams come true. Granted, the pattern still finds shape, but Kruppe senses that all is well with the world, symbolized by the vision of bounty now arrayed before his renewed appetites. Rigours of the flesh demand replenishment, after all.'

He drew another satisfied breath of the steamy air. 'We must needs await, at the end, the spin of a coin. In the meantime, of course, wondrous food beckons.'

In an alley facing the gates of Lady Simtal's estate, Adjunct Lorn had watched the Coin Bearer appear, and a slow, satisfied smile spread over her lips. Finding the boy had been one thing, but she'd had no desire to enter the garden where she'd buried the Finnest.

Minutes earlier she'd sensed the death of the Jaghut Tyrant. Had the Lord of Moon's Spawn been drawn into the battle? She hoped so. It had been her hope that the Jaghut would reach the city, perhaps even retrieve the Firmest, thus challenging the Son of Darkness as an equal. In retrospect, however, she realized that the Lord would never have permitted that.

Which meant that Whiskeyjack still lived. Well, there'd be another time for that, once the city was in the hands of the Empress and Tayschrenn. Perhaps then they'd find no need to disguise their efforts: they could make the arrest a public spectacle. With this coup even Dujek could not challenge them.

She'd watched the Coin Bearer race down the street, seeming not even to have noticed Moon's Spawn hanging so close overhead. A moment later, she followed. With the Coin in her hands, the Empress would bring Oponn to its knees.

Like a drowning voice, deep within her mind, came a question heavy with dismay and despair: What of your doubts? What of the woman who'd once challenged Tayschrenn, in Pale? Has so much changed? Has so much been destroyed?

The Adjunct shook her head, dispelling the plaintive cries. She was the arm of the Empress. The woman called Lorn was dead, had been dead for years, and would remain forever dead. And now the Adjunct moved through these hollow shadows, in a city cowering in fear. The Adjunct was a weapon. Its edge could bite deep, or it could snap, break. She might once have called the latter 'death'. Now, it was no more than the misfortune of war, a flaw in the weapon's design.

She paused and hid against a wall as the Coin Bearer stopped on a corner and realized for the first time what hovered above him. She considered attacking now, while he was so confused, possibly terrified. But then he continued on.

The Adjunct crouched down. Time for Tayschrenn's gambit. Hopefully the Jaghut Tyrant had managed to inflict damage upon the Moon's lord. She removed a small flask from her shirt and held the patinated glass up to the shine of gaslight. The contents swirled like trapped smoke as she gave it a shake.

She rose and threw it across the street. The flask struck a stone wall and shattered. Glowing red smoke curled upward, slowly taking shape.

The Adjunct spoke: 'You know your task, Lord of the Galayn. Succeed, and freedom will be yours.'

She unsheathed her sword and closed her eyes briefly, locating the Coin Bearer in her mind. He was fast, but she was faster. The Adjunct smiled again. Now, the Coin would be hers.

When she moved, it was as a blur, quicker than any eye could follow, even that of a Galayn lord loose on the material plane.

In his study, Baruk cradled his head in his hands. Mammot's death had come like a knife to his own heart, and he still felt its stabbing pain. He was alone in the chamber, having dismissed Roald earlier.

Rake had suspected. He'd refused to speak of it, considering it too sensitive a matter. The alchemist had wearily to admit that the Tiste Andii had been correct. Would he even have believed Rake? Undoubtedly, the power possessing Mammot had shielded itself, defying detection. Rake had anticipated Baruk's anger at such a suggestion, and had, wisely and with compassion, chosen to say nothing.

And now Mammot was dead, even as was the Jaghut Tyrant. Had it been Rake who had killed his old friend? If so, he hadn't used his sword, yet another mercy granted both Mammot and Baruk – the alchemist had sensed, if anything, a kind of relief in Mammot's death cry.

A soft cough at the door alerted him. Baruk rose swiftly and turned. His brows rose. 'Witch Derudan!'

Her face was pale, her smile wan. 'I thought of you, upon Mammot's end. I am here, so. Alas,' she said, as she strode to a chair by the fireplace and set her water-pipe down on the floor beside it, 'my servant has taken the rest of the evening off.' She removed the ash-cup and tapped its contents into the unlit hearth. 'Such mundane exertions,' she said, sighing.

At first, Baruk resented her intrusion. He preferred to mourn alone. But as he watched her, the supple grace of her movements, his thoughts changed. Her Warren was Tennes, ancient and bound to the cycles of seasons; and among the handful of deities she could call upon was Tennerock, the Boar of Five Tusks. Derudan's greatest power – the one she shared, in any case – was the Tusk named Love. He chastised himself. Slow had the realization come that she was bringing him a gift.

Derudan replaced the ash-cup and packed it with leaves. She closed a hand around it, and the contents glowed with sudden heat. A moment later the witch sat heavily in the chair. She drew deeply on the mouthpiece.

Baruk strode to the other chair. 'Rake believes it isn't yet over,' he said, sitting.

She nodded. 'I was witness to Mammot's end, yes? He was opposed by myself ... and a most remarkable wizard. The flesh that was Mammot was destroyed by a Moranth incendiary. The Jaghut spirit survived but was taken ... by an Azath.' Her heavy-lidded eyes appraised him.

'Azath? Here, in Darujhistan?'

'Indeed, such mysterious conjurings, known for their hunger for mages, will impose upon our efforts ... a certain caution, yes?'

'Where has it arisen?'

'In the garden of Simtal's estate. Did I not also mention a Moranth incendiary? Lady Simtal's Fête had some unusual guests, yes?'

'Malazans?'

'Twice my life saved – the wizard of whom I spoke, who commands within him seven Warrens—'

'Seven.?' Baruk said, flinching. 'Hood's Breath, is that even possible?'

'If they mean ill, it shall fall to the Son of Darkness to meet the challenge.'

Both stiffened as power surged into life somewhere nearby. The alchemist was on his feet, fists clenched. 'A demon is unleashed,' he hissed.

'I feel it as well,' Derudan said, her face white. 'Of great power.'

'A Demon Lord.' Baruk nodded. 'This is what Rake awaited.'

Derudan's eyes widened and she pulled on her mouthpiece before asking, 'Is he capable of defeating such a creature? Son of Darkness he is, but feel this creature's power, yes?'

'I don't know,' Baruk said quietly. 'If not, then the city is doomed.'

At that point there came another blow, followed by another. The witch and the alchemist stared at each other in recognition. Two of their Cabal had just died violent deaths.

'Paral,' she whispered in fear.

'And Tholas,' Baruk said. 'It's begun, and damn Rake for being so right.'

She looked at him blankly.

Baruk grimaced. 'Vorcan.'

Standing on the stained, pitted bronze tiles of the belfry's roof, Anomander Rake's head snapped around. His eyes deepened to black. The wind clawed at his long, silver hair and his grey cloak, its moan hollow and lost. He raised his gaze momentarily to Moon's Spawn as it moved west. He could feel its pain, as if the wounds it had received at Pale were somehow echoed in his own body. A flash of regret crossed his lean features.

Air buffeted him and he heard the heavy flap of wings. Rake smiled. 'Silanah,' he said softly, knowing she would hear him. The red dragon slipped between two towers and banked, returning to his position. 'I know you sense the Demon Lord's presence, Silanah. You would help me in this. I know, I know.' He shook his head. 'Return to Moon's Spawn, dear friend. This battle is mine. Yours is done. But know this: if I fail, you may seek to avenge my death.'

Silanah swept overhead and loosed a thin wail.

'Go home,' Rake whispered.

The red dragon cried again, then swung westward and rose through the night air.

He sensed a presence at his side and turned to find a tall, hooded man sharing his view of the city below. 'Unwise,' Rake murmured, 'to appear unannounced.'

The man sighed. 'The stones beneath your feet, Lord, are newly sanctified. I am reborn.'

'There is no place in the world for an Eldering god,' Rake said. 'Take my word for it.'

K'rul nodded. 'I know. I anticipated returning to the Realms of Chaos, with a Jaghut Tyrant for company. Alas, he evaded me.'

'And found imprisonment elsewhere.'

'I am relieved.'

The two were silent for a long minute, then K'rul sighed. 'I am lost. In this world. In this time.'

Rake grunted. 'You are not alone with those sentiments, Eldering One.'

'Do I follow in your steps, Lord? Do I seek out new battles, new games to play in the company of Ascendants? Are you rewarded in spirit for your efforts?'

'Sometimes,' Rake said quietly. 'But mostly, no, I am not.'

The hooded face turned to the Tiste Andii. 'Then why?'

'I know no other way of living.'

'I have no means of assisting you this night, Anomander Rake. I am manifest in this sanctified place, and manifest in a lone mortal's dreams, but nowhere else.'

'I will do my best, then,' Rake said, 'to avoid damaging your temple.'

K'rul bowed, then vanished.

Alone once again, Rake turned his attention to the street below. An apparition arrived. It paused to sniff the air, then began changing – *veering. A* Lord of the Galayn, and a Soletaken.

'Well,' the Lord of Moon's Spawn growled, 'so am I.' The Tiste Andii spread his arms wide, then rose upward. Kurald Galain sorcery swirled around him, blending his clothing, his massive sword, drawing all inward to

the shape he now climbed towards. The veering was smooth, eloquent, as jet-black wings unfolded from his shoulders. Flesh and bone surged in size, changed in shape.

As he flew higher, eyes fixed on the stars, Anomander Rake became a black dragon, silver-maned and dwarfing even Silanah. His eyes gleamed silver, the vertical slits of the pupils dilating. His breath gusted in heavy grunts, the snap of his wings loud amid the deep groan of muscle on bone. His chest swelled to draw in the cold, dry air, and power filled his being.

Rake climbed ever higher, slipping through a stray cloud that scudded in darkness over the city. When he finally tilted his wings forward and caressed the surface of a wayward wind, he looked down on a city that glimmered like a mottled copper coin at the bottom of a pellucid pond.

Sorcery flared occasionally, centred mostly in the Estate District, and Rake sensed death within those emanations. He considered the message delivered by Serrat, courtesy of a foul mage he'd thought a thousand leagues away. Was the sorcery the work of these unwelcome intruders? He rumbled in frustration – he would deal with them later. Before him now was a battle. The Empress and her Empire had challenged him again and again, wilful in the desire to test his strength. Each time he'd withdrawn, unwilling to commit himself. Very *well, Empress, my patience is at an end.*

The membrane of his wings tautened, the joints creaking, as he grunted a straining breath. He hung almost motionless for a second studying the great city beneath him. Then, tucking in his wings, Anomander Rake, the Son of Darkness and Lord of Moon's Spawn, plummeted.

Kalam knew the pattern of detonation the saboteurs would follow. He skirted one side of the street as he ran. So what if Moon's Spawn hung over them as if ready to descend on the city and crush the life from it like a god's heel – Fiddler and Hedge wouldn't give a damn. They had a job to do.

The assassin cursed every stubborn bone in their heads. Why didn't they run away like normal, sane people? He came to a corner and crossed the intersection diagonally. Ahead, at the far end of the street, rose Majesty

Hill. As he reached the corner he almost collided with the two saboteurs. Fiddler darted to one side of him, Hedge to the other, running as if not even recognizing him, terror plain on their faces.

Kalam reached back and with each hand grasped a cloak's hood. Then he grunted in pain as the two men jerked him backward and off his feet. 'Damn you bastards!' he yelled. 'Hold it!'

'It's Kal!' Hedge yelled.

Kalam twisted around to find a rusty shortsword inches from his face, with Fiddler's white face and wide eyes immediately behind it. 'Put that piece of junk away,' the assassin snapped. 'You want to give me an infection?'

'We're getting out of here!' Hedge hissed. 'Forget the damn mines! Forget everything!'

Still gripping their cloaks, Kalam shook them both. 'Calm down. What's happened?'

Fiddler moaned and pointed up the street.

Turning, Kalam stiffened.

A twelve-foot-tall creature shambled down the middle of the road, hunched shoulders wrapped in a glittering cape with a high cowl. A two-bladed axe was slung in its wide dragon-hide belt, its handle as long as Kalam was tall. The creature's wide, squat face held two slitted eyes.

'Oh, Hood's Gates and back,' the assassin muttered. 'That's Tayschrenn's precious lord.' He pushed the two saboteurs around the corner. 'Get moving. Back to Simtal's estate.' Neither objected, and moments later were running as fast as they could down the street. Kalam crouched at the corner and waited for the Galayn lord to come into view. When it did, he blanched. 'Soletaken.'

The Galayn was assuming a form better suited to wholesale destruction. The dun-brown dragon paused, its wingtips brushing the buildings on either side. Its rumble trembled the cobbles.

Kalam watched as the creature tensed its limbs, then rose upward on a wave of power. The darkness swallowed it. 'Hood's Breath,' he said. 'Now things are going to get messy.' He whirled and ran to catch up with the saboteurs.

The Coin Bearer came to a street lined with walled estates. He slowed his pace, studying each structure he passed.

The time had come, the Adjunct knew. Before the boy had a chance to get inside one of those places, where he might find protection. She adjusted her grip on the sword, padding in silence not fifteen feet behind him.

She drew a long, deep breath, then surged forward, sword's point extended.

At the sharp, ringing clang of metal immediately behind him, Crokus dived forward. He dipped a shoulder and rolled, regaining his feet. He cried out in shock. The woman who had attacked Coll in the hills was in a whirlwind exchange with a tall, round-shouldered man with two scimitars.

The thief's jaw dropped as he watched the fight. As good as the woman had shown herself against Coll, she was now being driven back as a flurry of attacks swept around her. They both moved so quickly that Crokus could not even see the parries, or the blades themselves, but as he watched, he saw the blossoming of wounds on the woman – her arms, legs, chest. Her expression held complete disbelief.

Then a voice chuckled beside him, 'He's good, ain't he?'

Crokus whirled to see a tall, thin man, wearing a grey and crimson longcoat, his hands in its pockets. He swung a narrow hatchet face to the thief and grinned. 'You headin' somewhere, boy? Somewhere safe?'

Crokus nodded numbly.

The man's grin widened. 'I'll escort you, then. And don't worry, you're covered from the roofs, too. Cowl's up there, damn his snakeskin hide. But

he's a powerful mage, anyway. Serrat was furious, I hear. Let's walk, then.'

Crokus let the man take his arm and lead him away from the duel. The thief cast a glance over his shoulder. The woman was trying to disengage now, her left arm hanging useless and glistening in the gaslight. Her opponent continued pressing, silent as a ghost.

'Don't worry,' the man beside him said, pulling him along. 'That's Corporal Blues. He lives for this stuff.'

'C-Corporal?'

'We've been covering your back, Coin Bearer.' The man's other hand reached up to his collar, which he turned back to reveal a brooch. 'The name's Fingers, Sixth Blade, Crimson Guard. You're being protected, boy, compliments of Prince K'azz and Caladan Brood.'

Crokus stared, then he scowled. 'Coin Bearer? What's that mean? I think you've got the wrong person.'

Fingers laughed drily. 'We figured you was walking blind and dumb, boy. The only explanation. You've got other people trying to protect you, too, you know. There's a coin in your pocket, probably two-headed, right?' He grinned at the thief's stunned expression. 'It's Oponn's own. You've been serving a god and you didn't even know it! How's your luck been, lately?' He laughed again.

Crokus stopped at a gate.

'This is the place, then?' Fingers asked, glancing at the estate rising behind the compound wall. 'Well, there's a powerful mage living in there, ain't there? Well,' he released the thief's arm, 'you should be safe enough inside. Good luck, boy, and I mean that. But listen,' Fingers' eyes hardened, 'if your luck goes sour, you dump that coin, y' hear?'

Confusion flickered across Crokus's face. 'Thank you, sir.'

'Our pleasure,' Fingers said, as he placed his hands in his pockets again. 'Get a move on, then.'

The Adjunct broke away, taking a cut across her right shoulder blade as she did so. She ran, blood spraying with the effort, and the man did not pursue.

What a fool she'd been! Thinking that the Coin Bearer wasn't protected! But who was that man? Never before had she faced such a swordsman, and the most appalling thing was that he had fought without the aid of sorcery. For once, her Otataral blade and her skill had not been enough.

She staggered, half blind, down the street, then wheeled round a corner. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of movement. The Adjunct threw her back to a wall and raised her sword again.

A large woman stood before her, regarding her quizzically. 'Looks to me,' she drawled, 'like you're already done.'

'Leave me be,' Lorn gasped.

'Can't do it,' Meese said. 'We been on you since Circle Breaker picked you up at the gate. The Eel says you've got some things t' pay for, lady. And we're here to collect.'

As soon as the woman said that, the Adjunct sensed another presence, immediately on her left. She cried out as she tried to spin into a defensive crouch, and in the cry was an overwhelming sense of frustration and despair. What a waste! she cursed. *No, not like this!*

Even as that thought thundered through her head, both women attacked. She parried the blade coming at her from the left, but could only watch in horror as the woman who'd spoken revealed two blades, both driving for her chest.

The Adjunct screamed in rage as the weapons punched into her. Her sword clanged and bounded as it struck the cobbles. Hands groping, Lorn slid down the wall. 'Who?' she managed, a blind need behind the word. *'Who?'*

One of the women bent low over her. 'What's that?'

Anguish filled Lorn's face, the corners of her mouth drooping as her eyes closed. 'Who?' she asked again. 'Who is this Eel?'

'Let's go, Meese,' the woman said, ignoring the body at her feet.

Paran found her sprawled on the grimy cobbles of an alley-mouth. Something had drawn him to her unerringly, a final closing of the mysterious link between them. Her sword was beside her, the grip slick with blood, its edges gouged and nicked. The captain crouched beside her.

'You made it a hard fight,' he whispered, 'for what that is worth.'

He watched her eyes flicker open. She stared up at him as recognition arrived. 'Captain. Ganoes.'

'Adjunct.'

'They have killed me.'

'Who?'

She managed a stained smile. 'I don't know. Two women. Looked like ... thieves. Thugs. Do you see ... the irony, Ganoes Paran?'

Thin-lipped, he nodded.

'No ... glorious end ... for the Adjunct. If you'd come ... a few minutes sooner ...'

The captain said nothing. He watched the life leave Lorn, feeling nothing. *Ill luck, knowing me, Adjunct. I'm sorry for that.* Then he collected the Otataral sword and slipped it into his scabbard.

Above him two voices spoke in unison. 'You gave him our sword.'

He straightened to find himself facing Oponn. 'The Rope took it from me, to be more precise.'

The Twins could not conceal their fear. They looked upon Paran with something akin to pleading. 'Cotillion spared you,' the sister said, 'the Hounds spared you. Why?'

Paran shrugged. 'Do you blame the knife, or the hand wielding it?'

'Shadowthrone never plays fair,' the brother whined, hugging himself.

'You and Cotillion both used mortals,' the captain said, baring his teeth, 'and paid for it. What do you want from me? Sympathy? Help?'

'That Otataral blade—' the sister said.

'Will not be used to do your dirty work,' Paran finished. 'You'd best flee, Oponn. I imagine even now Cotillion has given Shadowthrone the sword Chance, and the two are putting their heads together to plan how best to use it.'

The Twin Jesters flinched.

Paran laid a hand over the sword's sticky grip. 'Now. Else I return Cotillion's favour.'

The gods vanished.

The captain drew a deep breath. He turned once again to Lorn.

Her armour removed, she proved light in his arms.

The air roared around Anomander Rake as he plummeted, but he made no other sound, his Warren drawn in tight around him. Below, now sweeping lazy circles over Darujhistan, was the dun dragon – Rake's equal in size, with the power to match.

But it was a fool, hunting for him in the streets below.

Rake carefully spread his wings, angling towards the Galayn lord. His hind limbs reached down, talons spreading. He drew in the air around him, preparing for a burst of power. He was Kurald Galain, Tiste Andii, and darkness was his home.

The Galayn lord was immediately beneath him now, growing larger with incredible speed. Rake opened his mouth, head snapping back as he bit into a wall of air. This sound brought the dun dragon's gaze upward, but it was already too late.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I am the House
imprisoning in my birth
demonic hearts,
so locked in each chamber
some trembling enraged
antiquity.
And these roots of stone
spread the deepest cracks
in parched ground
holding for ever the dream
of fruit, ah, pilgrims
come to my door
and starve ...

Azath (ii.iii)
Adaephon (b.?)

The compound beyond the gate was empty. Crokus ran across it, wondering if he was too late. He bounded up the steps and reached for the door latch. A burst of energy flung him backwards.

Dazed, the thief found himself sitting on the paving stones before the steps, his flesh tingling. At the door a deep crimson glow slowly faded. A ward. 'Hood!' he hissed, climbing to his feet. He'd run into barriers like these before, in the Higher Estates. There was no way to get through them.

Cursing again, Crokus whirled and raced to the gate. He emerged on to the street and looked around, seeing no one. If those Crimson Guard still protected him, they weren't showing themselves.

There was a slight chance that the garden entrance to Baruk's estate was unguarded by magic – a very slight chance. He ran down the street and

turned into the first alley to his right. There'd be a wall to scale, but he did not consider that much of an obstacle.

He came to the alley's end and skidded to a halt on the street beyond. The wall was high, he saw. He'd need a running start. Crokus trotted across the street, trying to catch his breath. What was the point of all this? Couldn't Baruk take care of himself, after all? Wasn't he a High Mage, and hadn't even Fingers commented on the alchemist's sorcerous defences?

He hesitated, scowling at the wall opposite him.

At that moment a piercing, earth-shaking scream was loosed directly above the street. Crokus threw himself against the wall behind him as an enormous shape descended into the gaslight. Filling the street, it struck the ground less than twenty yards to the thief's left. He was thrown from his feet by the impact. Stones shattered.

He ducked beneath the hail of bricks and cobbles, then, as the scatter of rubble diminished, he jumped to his feet.

A dragon, its wings tattered and streaked with blood, slowly regained its feet in the street, wagging its massive wedge-shaped head from side to side. Along its brown flanks, scales had been torn away, revealing deep puncture wounds. Its neck and shoulders glistened with blood.

Crokus saw that the wall beyond it – Baruk's – had been obliterated, opening the garden to his view. Snapped tree trunks rose amid steaming earth. A raised patio marked the approach of the estate's back entrance. Two toppled statues lay in pieces before the doors.

The dragon looked stunned. Crokus tensed. Now was the time to move. Almost disbelieving his own temerity, the thief darted into the street behind the creature, hoping to reach the cover of the garden. His gaze remained on the dragon as he ran, his thoughts on the coin of luck in his pocket.

Then, before his eyes, the creature's shape changed, drawing into itself in a shimmering haze. Crokus slowed, then stopped, unable to pull away his attention. His heart hammered against his ribs, as if seeking escape. Each

drawn breath was a painful gasp. His luck, he told himself in terror, had just ended.

The shimmering faded, and a giant man-shaped apparition now stood on the street, cloaked and cowled.

Crokus tried to will himself to move, but his body refused to obey. He stared, eyes widening, as the demon turned to him. It snarled and removed an enormous axe from its belt. Hefting the weapon, it spoke in a deep, soft voice. 'What reason to continue this?' it asked reasonably. 'The Empress permits your escape, Lord. Once again she grants you mercy. Accept it, and leave.'

'Good idea,' the thief whispered. Then he frowned, for the demon's attention, he now saw, was directed past him.

A man spoke behind him. 'We run no further, Galayn.'

A hand fell on the thief's shoulder, breaking the spell of immobility. Crokus ducked and spun to one side, then looked up into shifting, indigo eyes set in a black, narrow face.

'Flee, mortal,' the silver-haired man said, drawing a two-handed sword from the scabbard slung between his shoulder-blades. The black weapon seemed almost invisible, as if it swallowed all light that found it.

'You were at the fête!' Crokus blurted.

The man's eyes flickered, as if seeing him for the first time. 'Coin Bearer,' he said, with a wry smile, 'fear not. Brood has convinced me to spare you, at least for the moment. Begone, child.' His gaze returned to the Galayn lord. 'This will be a close thing.'

'I know that weapon,' the demon snarled. 'Dragnipurake. And I smell the reek of Tiama in you, Lord. There is more of her in you than Tiste Andii blood.'

Crokus backed against what remained of Baruk's wall.

The Galayn lord grinned, revealing long, curved canines. 'The Empress would reward your services, Lord. You've only to say yes, and this battle

can be avoided.'

Anomander Rake stepped forward. 'Attend, Galayn.'

With a roar the demon attacked, axe whistling through the air and streaming blue flames.

Rake whirled his sword in a circle, catching the axe and adding to its momentum. As the double-blades swept past, the Tiste Andii stepped in close, sword drawn back, pommel against his left hip. In a blur of motion he extended the blade. The demon ducked and, releasing one hand from the axe haft, reached for Rake's throat. The Tiste Andii twisted his right shoulder and caught the blow.

Thrown backwards, Rake landed heavily on the cobbles.

The demon pounced, flaming weapon above its head.

Rake regained his feet in time to catch the axe with his sword. The clash of weapons sent a jolt through the air and ground. The demon's axe flared bright white, cascading light like liquid. Rake's sword was swallowed in darkness, devouring the lashing waves of light that struck it.

The flagstones beneath Crokus's feet tilted sickeningly, as if the stones themselves had turned to soft clay. Overhead the stars swam wildly. Gripped by nausea, Crokus fell to his knees.

Rake began to launch attacks, savage swings of his black weapon. At first the demon held its ground, delivering fierce ripostes, then staggered back a step, then another. Relentless, Rake pressed his attack. 'To *the Mother's regret,'* he grated between blows, *'was Light granted birth. To her dismay ... she saw too late ... its corruption. Galayn ... you are the unintended victim ... to punishment ... long overdue.'*

The demon reeled beneath the blows, desperately parrying every attack, no longer counter-attacking. The light bleeding from the axe flickered, dimmed, flared fitfully as darkness closed in around the blade. Shrieking, the demon launched itself at Rake. As it descended over the Tiste Andii, Crokus saw a streak of black burst from the demon's back, slicing through

the cloak. The axe flew from the creature's hands, its fire dying as it clattered on the ground.

Squealing in horror, the demon clawed at the sword impaling it. Black smoke spread in swift tendrils from the weapon, engulfing the demon. The smoke twisted, became chains, drawing taut. The Galayn screamed in earnest.

Rake regained his feet and pushed the sword through the demon's chest until the hilt jammed against bone. The demon sank to its knees, its black eyes locking with Rake's own.

The swimming stars settled, the flagstones beneath the thief became solid once again, though warped and twisted. Crokus swallowed bile, his eyes fixed on the demon. It seemed to collapse in on itself, the chains of black smoke ever tightening, pulling the creature into the sword. It toppled backwards and Rake drove the weapon's point into the cobbled street, pinning the demon. Then the Tiste Andii leaned heavily on the hilt, and Crokus now noticed the blood-soaked cloth surrounding Rake's shoulder, where the demon's hand had struck. Wearily, the Tiste Andii swung his gaze to the thief.

'Move quickly,' he rasped. 'The alchemist is in danger. I cannot protect him now. Hurry, Coin Bearer.'

Crokus whirled and ran.

The death of Travale, third in the Cabal, still echoed in their thoughts. The witch Derudan had inscribed an ash circle on the floor in the centre of the chamber. With Baruk's help, she placed the two plush chairs within it, and now sat, smoking steadily, her dark eyes following the alchemist as he paced.

Baruk found himself reluctant to enter the protective circle. While they would be safe there, surrounded by High Tennes sorcery, they would not be able to counter-attack, should Vorcan arrive. More, some things could penetrate the defences of magic. Otataral, that strange rust-like ore from the

Tanno Hills of Seven Cities, immediately came to mind. It was unlikely that Vorcan would possess such material, given that she was a High Mage, yet still Baruk felt reluctant to place himself in a position where he could not use his Warren against the assassin.

'Those of the Cabal,' Derudan said slowly, 'who are now dead, yes? Stubborn, convinced of their own invincibility. No doubt they paced restless steps, awaiting the assassin's imminent arrival.'

Baruk paused to reply, but was interrupted by a loud, inhuman scream from outside. This was followed immediately by a concussion that rattled the walls. The alchemist made a move towards the door.

'Wait!' Derudan called from the circle. 'Appease not this curiosity, Baruk, for Vorcan will surely take advantage, yes?'

'A ward was shattered,' Baruk said. 'My defences are breached.'

'More the reason for caution,' Derudan admonished. 'Friend, I plead with you, join me here.'

'Very well,' Baruk sighed, moving towards her. A gust of air brushed the left side of his face. Derudan cried out a warning even as the alchemist turned.

Vorcan, her gloved hands glowing red, surged towards Baruk. He raised his arms, knowing full well that he would be too late. At that moment, however, another figure appeared, emerging from darkness to intercept the Master Assassin with a flurry of blows. Vorcan reeled back, then lashed out with a hand, catching her attacker a glancing blow.

An agonized shriek rang through the chamber. Baruk stared, only now realizing that his protector was a Tiste Andii woman. He stepped aside lithely as she flew past him to strike the floor then the wall, where she lay unmoving. The alchemist pulled his gaze back to Vorcan, seeing that one of her hands no longer glowed.

He gestured, and virulent sorcery erupted from his arm, arcing yellow lightning. Vorcan hissed a counter-spell and the lightning was swallowed by a red haze before her that dimmed quickly, then disappeared. She advanced.

Vaguely, Baruk heard the witch Derudan shouting at him. Yet it was the Mistress of the Assassins' death-filled eyes that held him. The ease with which she'd dispelled his power made it clear that she was his master in sorcery. All he could do now, he understood with clarity, was await his death.

But Baruk heard a grunt behind him, then Vorcan gasped. The hilt of a dagger protruded from the assassin's chest. Frowning, she reached for it, then pulled it out and tossed it aside.

'All ...' the alchemist heard the Tiste Andii woman gasp from the floor behind him '... all I can do. My apologies, Lord.'

Derudan appeared behind Vorcan. As she raised her hands and began an incantation, Vorcan whirled and something sped from her hand. The witch grunted, then crumpled.

Anguish flooded Baruk. With a wordless roar he launched himself at Vorcan. She laughed and ducked to one side, throwing out her glowing hand. The alchemist twisted, off-balance, narrowly avoiding the killing touch, then staggered past. He heard her laughter again, as she moved in behind him.

A dozen feet in front of Baruk was the door. The alchemist's eyes widened to find it open. A youth crouched there, holding blockish objects in each hand.

Expecting at any moment to feel Vorcan's touch, Baruk threw himself forward. He saw the boy straighten at the same time and thrust forward first his right arm, then his left. As the alchemist fell towards the floor, two bricks flew over him. He heard them strike the woman behind him, one making a crunching sound, the other crackling. A flash of red accompanied the crackle.

As he struck the floor, the breath was hammered from Baruk's lungs. Agonized seconds passed as he struggled to draw air into his tortured chest. He rolled on to his back. Vorcan, he saw, lay motionless almost against his feet. The boy's face came into view, streaked with sweat, brow furrowed with concern.

'Alchemist Baruk?' he asked.

The man nodded.

The boy sighed, then grinned. 'You're alive. Good. Rallick sent me to warn you.'

Baruk sat up. 'The witch,' he said hoarsely. He pointed. 'Tend to her, please.'

He felt his strength returning as he watched the boy crouch beside Derudan.

'She's breathing,' Crokus announced. 'There's some kind of knife in her, looks like it's covered in sap.' He reached down to touch it.

'No!' Baruk shouted.

Crokus jumped back in alarm.

'Poison,' the alchemist said, climbing to his feet. 'Help me to her, quickly.' A moment later he knelt beside Derudan. A quick glance at the sap-like substance coating the blade confirmed his suspicion. 'White paralt,' he said.

'That's a spider, isn't it?'

Baruk laid a hand on Derudan. 'Your knowledge surprises me, boy,' he said. 'Fortunately, she's in the home of the one man who possesses its antidote.' He muttered something and a phial appeared in his hand.

'Rallick said there was no antidote to white paralt.'

'It's not something I'm likely to announce.' Baruk unstoppered the phial and poured the contents down the witch's throat, triggering a coughing fit. As Derudan's breathing became even, Baruk leaned back and eyed Crokus. 'You seem well acquainted with Rallick. What's your name?'

'Crokus. Mammot was my uncle, sir. I saw him die.'

Derudan's eyelids flickered, then opened. She smiled lazily. 'What I see pleases me,' she said weakly. 'Yes?'

Baruk returned the smile. 'Yes, my friend. But I make no claim for defeating Vorcan. That falls to Crokus, nephew of Mammot.'

Derudan's gaze swung to the youth. 'Ah, the one I came near to treading on earlier this evening.' The amusement left her expression. 'I am sorry for Mammot, child.'

'So am I,' he replied.

Baruk rose and turned. He hissed a vehement curse. Vorcan's body was gone. 'She's fled.' He hurried over to the Tiste Andii woman, he bent down and examined her. She was dead. 'I will soon know your name,' he whispered, 'and I will remember it.'

'I have to go!' Crokus announced.

Baruk wondered at the sudden panic in the boy's face.

'I mean,' Crokus continued, 'if everything's over here, that is.'

'I believe it is,' the alchemist answered. 'I thank you, Crokus, for your skill at throwing bricks.'

The boy went to the door. He paused, then tossed a coin into the air. He caught it, and grinned tightly. 'Just lucky, I suppose.' Then he was gone.

Captain Paran crouched beside Coil's bed. 'Still asleep,' he said, rising and facing Whiskeyjack. 'Go ahead.'

Kalam and the two saboteurs had arrived minutes earlier. So far, the sergeant mused, no losses, though the captain's armour had taken a beating and the look in his face when he'd entered the room with Lorn's body in his arms warned Whiskeyjack away from probing Paran's state of mind too deeply. The Adjunct's body now occupied a second bed, motionless and pale, a strange ironic smile curving her bloodless lips.

The sergeant studied everyone in the small room, the faces he knew so well all watching him, waiting. His gaze held on Sorry, or Apsalar as she now called herself. Whatever Mallet had done to her, she was a changed

woman from the one he'd known. Less, and somehow more as well. Even Mallet was unsure of what he'd done. Certain memories, skills had been freed, and with them a brutal knowledge. The pain was there in the woman's eyes, a pain layered in years of horror – yet it seemed that she had it under control, that she'd found a way, a strength, to live with what she'd been. Her only words upon meeting him had been: 'I wish to return home, Sergeant.'

He had no objection, though he wondered how she planned to cross two continents and the ocean between them. Whiskeyjack reached for the wrapped forearm bones lying on the table. 'Yes, sir,' he said, in answer to Paran's command.

The hot sweaty air in the room thickened with tension. Whiskeyjack hesitated. There'd been a battle in Darujhistan's streets, and Quick Ben had confirmed the Galayn lord's death. In fact, the black wizard seemed still in shock. The sergeant sighed under his breath and massaged his newly healed leg, then drove the forearm's blade into the tabletop.

Contact was immediate. High Fist Dujek's gravelly voice filled the room. 'About time, Whiskeyjack! Don't bother telling me about the Galayn lord – Tayschrenn's in a coma or something. Everyone in Headquarters heard his scream. So Anomander Rake took out the beast. What else?'

Whiskeyjack glanced at Paran, who nodded deferentially. 'Adjunct Lorn's gambit failed,' the sergeant said. 'She's dead. We have her body with us. The intersections remain mined – we're not detonating them, High Fist, since they're likely to open the gas caverns beneath the city and turn us all into ash. So.' He drew a deep breath, feeling a twinge from his leg – Mallet had done what he could, and that'd been a lot, but some damage remained, and it made him feel fragile. 'So,' he repeated softly, 'we're pulling out, High Fist.'

Dujek was silent, then he grunted. 'Problems, Whiskeyjack. One, we're about to lose Pale. As I suspected, Caladan Brood left the Crimson Guard to handle things up north, and marched down here with his Tiste Andii. He's also got Rhivi with him, and Jorrick's Barghast, who've just finished chewing up Gold Moranth. Two, it gets worse.' The High Fist swallowed audibly. 'Seven Cities is maybe a week away from open rebellion. The Empress knows it. Some Claw from Genabaris arrived half an hour ago,

looking for Tayschrenn. My people got to him first. Whiskeyjack, he was carrying a handwritten message from the Empress to Tayschrenn. I've just been outlawed by the Empire. It's official, and Tayschrenn was to have effected my arrest and execution. We're on our own, friend.'

The room was silent. Whiskeyjack closed his eyes briefly. 'Understood, High Fist. So, when do you march?'

'Seems the Black Moranth are with us – don't ask why. Anyway, I have a parley at dawn tomorrow with Caladan Brood and Kallor. That will decide matters, I suspect. Either he lets us walk, or he kills us taking Pale. Everything's riding on what he knows about the Pannion Seer.'

Whiskeyjack said, 'We're rendezvousing with some Black Moranth in a couple of days, High Fist. Makes me wonder how much they'd guessed when that arrangement was made. Anyway, they'll take us to you, wherever you are.'

'No,' Dujek replied. 'We may be under siege here. The Black will drop you off on the Catlin Plain. Their orders are clear on this, but you're welcome to try overruling them.'

The sergeant grimaced. Not likely. 'Catlin Plain it is. Just means it'll take us longer to get to you, sir.'

The glow surrounding the bones flickered briefly and they heard an echoing thump. Fiddler chuckled. Dujek had just pounded a fist on the table at his end of the conversation.

Whiskeyjack shot the saboteur a ferocious look.

'Captain Paran?' Dujek bellowed.

'Here, High Fist,' Paran replied, stepping forward.

'What I'm about to say is to Whiskeyjack, but I want you to hear it, Captain.'

'I'm listening.'

'Sergeant, if you want to be in my army, you'd better get used to the new order. First, I'm placing the Bridgeburners under Captain Paran's command. Second, you're not a sergeant any more, Whiskeyjack. You are my second-in-command, and that means responsibilities. I don't want you anywhere near Pale. And you know I'm right, dammit. Captain Paran?'

'Yes?'

'Whiskeyjack's squad has earned the right to walk. Understood? If any of them elect to rejoin the Bridgeburners, fine. But I don't want any recriminations if they decide otherwise. I trust that's clear.'

'Yes, High Fist.'

'And with Whiskeyjack between commissions,' Dujek continued inexorably, 'he's just coming along for the ride, if you follow me, Captain.'

Paran grinned. 'I do.'

'Now, the Black Moranth will know the story by the time they pick you up, so go with them.'

'Yes, High Fist.'

Dujek growled, 'Questions, Whiskeyjack?'

'No,' the grizzled veteran answered glumly.

'All right. Hopefully, we'll talk later.'

The bones' glow died.

Captain Paran rounded on the soldiers. He studied each face. *They were* to *have been my command. I could not have done better anywhere*. 'Very well,' he said gruffly. 'Who is ready to be outlawed and counted among Dujek's rebels?'

Trotts was the first to rise, his teeth bared. He was followed by Quick Ben, Hedge and Mallet.

There was a shocked silence, then Kalam nodded at Fiddler and cleared his throat. 'We're with you, only we're not going with you. Me and Fiddler,

that is.'

'Can you explain that?' Paran asked quietly.

Apsalar spoke up, surprising everyone. 'They'll find that hard to do, Captain. And, I admit, I'm not sure what they're up to, but they're coming with me. Back to the Empire. Home.'

With an uneasy shrug, Fiddler rose and faced Whiskeyjack. 'We feel we owe it to her, sir,' he said. He looked to the captain. 'And we're settled on it, sir. But we're coming back, if we can.'

Bemused, Whiskeyjack pushed himself painfully to his feet. As he turned to face Paran, he froze. Behind the captain, Coll sat upright on the bed. 'Urn,' Whiskeyjack said, gesturing.

Tension burgeoned in the room once again as everyone swung to Coll. Paran stepped forward in genuine relief.

'Coll! I'm—' He stopped abruptly, then said tonelessly, 'You've been awake for some time, I see.'

Coil's eyes flicked to the bones stuck in the tabletop, then returned to Paran. 'Heard it all,' he said. 'So tell me, Paran, do you soldiers need any help getting out of Darujhistan?'

Rallick stood in the darkness beneath the trees at the edge of the glade. It seemed that his magic-deadening powers had proved insufficient after all. He'd been driven from his seat by what had felt like a giant hand – a god's hand, sure and powerful and unyielding. He'd watched in astonishment as a maze of roots clambered swiftly across the clearing, headed towards the terrace. He'd heard a shriek, then the roots returned, wrapped around a man-shaped ... apparition, which the roots pulled unceremoniously into the earth.

Rallick had been filled suddenly with near-euphoria. He knew with unaccountable certainty, that what grew here was right, and just.

It was new, young. Even now, as he continued watching it, he saw trembles of shaping ripple beneath its angular, geometric surfaces. What

had been no more than a tree stump less than an hour ago was now a house. A massive door lay half buried in shadows beneath an arching branch. Vines barred shuttered windows. A balcony hung above and to the left of the door, festooned with leaves and creepers. It led into a kind of tower, turreted above the second storey and shingled to a gnarled peak. Another tower marked the house's front right flank, this one stockier and windowless, its roof flat with jagged merlons lining the edge. He suspected that this roof was a platform, with access through a trap-door of some kind.

The glade around the structure had changed, too, becoming mounded here and there as if the house's yard was a burial ground. Young, scraggly trees ringed each oblong mound, each growing as if an invisible wind twisted them away from the humped, grassy earth. The roots had dragged the apparition into one such mound.

It felt right, and just. These two words echoed in the assassin's head, with an appeal that wrapped calm around his heart. He almost imagined he felt an affinity with this child-house – as if it knew of him and accepted him.

He knew the house to be empty. Another sourceless certainty.

Rallick continued watching, as the lines of the house grew firm, sharply defined. A musty smell pervaded the area, as of freshly turned earth. The assassin felt at peace.

A moment later he heard thrashing behind him, and whirled to see Vorcan stagger through the undergrowth. Her face was covered in blood from a gash to her brow, and she nearly collapsed into Rallick's arms.

'Tiste Andii,' she gasped. 'After me. Hunting. They seek to avenge a murder!'

Rallick looked past her, and his eyes, long accustomed to the surrounding darkness, detected silent movement among the trees, closing in. He hesitated, gripping the now unconscious woman in his arms. Then he bent down, threw Vorcan over one shoulder, turned and ran towards the house.

He knew that the door would open for him, and it did. Beyond was a dark antechamber and an archway leading into a hallway running from side to

side. A gust of warm, sweet air flowed over Rallick, and he entered without pause.

Korlat, blood-kin to Serrat, slowed as she approached the strange house. The door had closed behind their quarry. She came to the edge of the clearing, then squatted on her haunches. Her fellow hunters gathered slowly around her.

Horult hissed angrily, then said, 'Have you summoned our lord, Korlat?'

The woman shook her head. 'I know of such creations from old,' she said. 'The Deadhouse of Malaz City, the Odhanhouse of Seven Cities... *Azath edieimarn*, Pillars of Innocence – this door will not open to us.'

'Yet it opened to them,' Horult said.

'There is precedence. The Azath choose their own. It was so with the Deadhouse. Two men were chosen: one who would be Emperor, the other who would accompany him. Kellanved and Dancer.'

'I sense its power,' Orfantal whispered. 'Our lord could destroy it, now, while it's still young.'

'Yes,' agreed Korlat. 'He could.' She was silent a moment, then she rose. 'I am blood-kin to the fallen,' she said.

'You are blood-kin,' the others intoned.

'The quest for vengeance is ended,' Korlat said, the lines around her almond-shaped eyes tightening. 'Our lord will not be summoned. Leave him to his recovery. The Azath will not be touched, for it is new, a child.' Her eyes, soft brown, slowly regarded those of her companions. 'The Queen of Darkness spoke thus of Light when it was first born: "It is new, and what is new is innocent, and what is innocent is precious. Observe this child of wonder, and know respect."'

Orfantal scowled. 'Thus did Light survive, and so was Darkness destroyed, the purity vanquished – and now you would have us flawed as

our Queen was flawed. Light became corrupted and destroyed our world, Korlat, or have you forgotten?'

Korlat's smile was a sad one. 'Cherish such flaws, dear sister, for our Queen's was hope, and so is mine. Now we must leave.'

Kruppe's expression was benign as he watched Crokus approach, clearly exhausted by this night of endless running. He nudged Murillio and fluttered his fingers in the young thief's direction. 'The lad returns with undue haste, yet I fear such sad tidings as Kruppe must bring.'

'He's had a rough night all around,' Murillio commented. He leaned against the gate's support wall outside the Simtal Estate. The streets remained empty, the citizens shocked numb with the night's horrors.

Kruppe gestured at Moon's Spawn, now a league to the west, well beyond the city's walls. 'A remarkable contraption, that. However, Kruppe is pleased that it has chosen to depart. Imagine, even the stars blotted out, leaving naught but dread in this world.'

'I need a drink,' Murillio muttered.

'Excellent idea,' Kruppe said. 'Shall we await the lad, however?'

The wait was not long. Crokus recognized them and slowed his frantic run. 'Apsalar's been kidnapped by the Empire!' he shouted. 'I need help!' He wobbled to a halt before Murillio. 'And Rallick's still in the garden—'

'Tut, tut,' Kruppe said. 'Easy, lad. Apsalar's location is known to Kruppe. As for Rallick, well...' He faced the street and waved his arms expansively. 'Breathe the night air, Crokus! A new year has begun! Come, let us walk, the three of us, masters of Darujhistan!' He linked arms with his comrades and pulled them forward.

Murillio sighed. 'Rallick's missing,' he explained. 'There's some kind of extraordinary house in Coil's garden now.'

'Ah, so much unveiled in that single statement!' Kruppe leaned against Crokus. 'While, no doubt, the lad's secret, overriding concern at the moment

regards the fate of a fair young maiden, whose life was saved at the last moment by a nobleson named Gorlas, of all things. Saved, Kruppe says, from a ton of masonry shrugged off a wall. 'Twas heroic, indeed. The lass near-swooned with satisfaction.'

'What are you talking about?' Crokus demanded. 'Who was saved?'

Murillio snorted. 'I think, dear Kruppe, Master of Darujhistan, you've got the wrong fair maiden in mind.'

'She's not fair, anyway,' Crokus asserted.

Kruppe's chest swelled slightly. 'You need but ask the gods, lad, and they'll tell that life itself isn't fair. Now, are you interested in how Lady Simtal's estate has just this night become Coil's estate? Or is your mind so thoroughly enamoured of this new love of yours that even the fates of your dearest friends – Kruppe included – yield such lack of interest?'

Crokus bridled. 'Of course I'm interested!'

'Then the story begins, as always, with Kruppe ...'

Murillio groaned. 'Thus spake the Eel.'

EPILOGUE

I have seen a rumour born
swathed in snug mystery
left lying under the sun
in the hills of the Gadrobi

where the sheep have scattered
on wolf-laden winds
and the shepherds have fled
a whispering of sands

and it blinked in the glare
a heart hardened into stone
whilst the shadow of the Gates of Nowhere
crept 'cross the drifting dust of home

I have seen this rumour born
a hundred thousand hunters of the heart
in a city bathed in blue light...

Rumour Born (I. i-iv)
Fisher (b.?)

The sun lit the morning mists into a shield of white over the lake. Down on the beach a fisher-boat rocked in the freshening waves. Unmoored, it was moments before pulling free of the pebbles.

Mallet helped Whiskeyjack to a dome of rock above the beach, where they sat. The healer's gaze hesitated on the figure of Quick Ben, standing with shoulders hunched and staring across the lake. He followed the wizard's gaze. Moon's Spawn hung low on the horizon, a gold cast to its ravaged basalt. Mallet grunted. 'It's heading south. I wonder what that means?'

Whiskeyjack squinted against the glare. He began to massage his temples.

'More headaches?' Mallet asked.

'Not so bad, lately,' the grizzled man said.

'It's the leg that worries me,' the healer muttered. 'I need to work on it some more, and you need to stay off it awhile.'

Whiskeyjack grinned. 'As soon as there's time,' he said.

Mallet sighed. 'We'll work on it then.'

From the forested slope behind them Hedge called, 'They're coming in!'

The healer helped Whiskeyjack stand. 'Hell,' he whispered. 'It could've been a lot worse, right, Sergeant?'

Whiskeyjack glared across the lake. 'Three lost ain't that bad, considering.'

A pained expression crossed Mallet's face. He said nothing.

'Let's move,' Whiskeyjack growled. 'Captain Paran hates tardiness. And maybe the Moranth have good news. Be a change, wouldn't it?'

From the beach, Quick Ben watched Mallet supporting his sergeant up the slope. Was it time? he wondered. To stay alive in this business, no one could afford to let up. The best plans work inside other plans, and when it's right to feint, feint big. Keeping the other hand hidden is the hard part.

The wizard felt a stab of regret. No, it wasn't time. Give the old man a chance to rest. He forced himself into motion. He wouldn't let himself look back – never a good idea. The scheme was hatched.

'Whiskeyjack's going to howl when he hears this one,' he whispered to himself.

Captain Paran listened to the others on the beach below, but made no move to join them. *Not yet.* His brush with Ascendants seemed to have left him with a new sensitivity – or perhaps it was the Otataral sword scabbarded at his side. But he could sense her, now, already in her adolescence, plump as he knew she'd be, smiling with her heavy-lidded eyes deceptively sleepy as she studied the morning sky.

I will come to *you,* he promised her. *When this Pannion Seer and his cursed holy war is crushed, I will come to you then, Tattersail.*

I know.

He stiffened. That voice in his head had not been his own. Or had it? He waited, waited for more. *Tattersail?* Only silence answered him. *Ah, my imagination, nothing more. To think you would call up enough of your old life, to find the feelings you once held for me, find them and feel them once again. I am a fool.*

He rose from his crouch at Lorn's graveside – a mound of rocks – and brushed twigs and orange pine needles from his clothing. *Look at me now. Agent for the Adjunct once, now a soldier. Finally, a soldier.* Smiling, he made his way down to his squad.

Then I shall await the coming of a soldier.

Paran stopped in his tracks, then, smiling, continued on. 'Now that,' he whispered, 'was not my imagination.'

The tradecraft hugged the southern shore, making for Dhavran and the river mouth. Kalam leaned on the gunwale, his gaze sweeping the north horizon's ragged, snow-capped mountains. Near him stood another passenger, hardly memorable and disinclined to talk.

The only voices reaching the assassin came from Apsalar and Crokus. They sounded excited, each revolving around the other in a subtle dance that was yet to find its accompanying words. A slow, half smile quirked Kalam's mouth. It'd been a long time since he'd heard such innocence.

A moment later, Crokus appeared beside him, his uncle's demon familiar clutching his shoulder. 'Coll says that the Empire's capital, Unta, is as big as Darujhistan. Is it?'

Kalam shrugged. 'Maybe. A lot uglier. I don't expect we'll have a chance to visit it, though. Itko Kan lies on the south coast, while Unta is on Kartool Bay, the north-east coast. Miss Darujhistan already?'

An expression of regret came over Crokus's face. He stared down into the waves. 'Just some people there,' he said.

The assassin grunted. 'Know how you feel, Crokus. Hell, look at Fiddler back there, mooning away as if somebody had cut off one of his arms and one of his legs.'

'Apsalar still can't believe you'd go to all this trouble for her. She doesn't remember being much liked in your squad.'

'Wasn't her, though, was it? This woman here is a fishergirl from some two-copper village. And she's a long way from home.'

'She's more than that,' Crokus muttered. He had a coin in his hand and was playing with it absently.

Kalam threw the boy a sharp look. 'Really,' he said, deadpan.

Crokus nodded affably. He held up the coin and examined the face on it. 'Do you believe in luck, Kalam?'

'No,' the assassin growled.

Crokus grinned happily. 'Me neither.' He flipped the coin into the air.

They watched it plummet into the sea, flash once, then vanish beneath the waves.

From near the bow, Circle Breaker slowly nodded to himself. The Eel would be delighted with the news, not to mention greatly relieved. Then he returned his attention to the west, and wondered what it would be like, no longer anonymous to the world.

This ends the first tale
of the
Malazan
Book of the Fallen

GLOSSARY

TITLES AND GROUPS

First Sword of Empire: Malazan and T'lan Imass, a title denoting an Imperial champion

Fist: a military governor in the Malazan Empire

High Fist: a commander of armies in a Malazan Campaign

Kron T'lan Imass: the name of the clans under the command of Kron

Logros T'lan Imass: the name of the clans under the command of Logros

The Bridgeburners: a legendary elite division in the Malaz 2nd Army

The Crimson Guard: a famous mercenary company commanded by a deposed prince

The Pannion Seer: a mysterious prophet ruling the lands south of Darujhistan

The Warlord: the name for Caladan Brood

The Claw: the covert organization of the Malazan Empire

PEOPLES (HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN)

Barghast (non-human): pastoral nomadic warrior society

Daru: cultural group sharing citizenry in cities in northern Genabackis

Gadrobi: indigenous cultural group in central Genabackis

Genabarii: cultural group (and language) in north-west Genabackis

Forkrul Assail (non-human): extinct mythical people (one of the Four Founding Races)

Jaghut (non-human): extinct mythical people (one of the Four Founding Races)

K'Chain Che'Malle (non-human): extinct mythical people (one of the Four Founding Races)

Moranth (non-human): highly regimented civilization centred in Cloud Forest

Rhivi: pastoral nomadic society in central plains of Genabackis

T'lan Imass: one of the Four Founding Races, now immortal

Tiste Andii (non-human): an Elder Race

Trell (non-human): pastoral nomadic warrior society in transition to sedentarianism

ASCENDANTS

Apsalar, Lady of Thieves

Beru, Lord of Storms

Burn, Lady of the Earth, the Sleeping Goddess

Caladan Brood, the Warlord

Cotillion/The Rope (the Assassin of High House Shadow)

Dessembrae, Lord of Tragedy

D'rek, the Worm of Autumn (sometimes the Queen of Disease, *see* Poliel)

Fanderay, She-Wolf of Winter

Fener, the Boar (see *also* Tennerock)

Gedderone, Lady of Spring and Rebirth

Great Ravens, ravens sustained by magic

Hood (King of High House Death)

Jhess, Queen of Weaving

Kallor, the High King

K'rul, Elder God

Mowri, Lady of Beggars, Slaves and Serfs

Nerruse, Lady of Calm Seas and Fair Wind

Oponn, Twin Jesters of Chance

Osserc, Lord of the Sky

Poliel, Mistress of Pestilence

Queen of Dreams (Queen of High House Life)

Shadowthrone/Ammanas (King of High House Shadow)

Shedenul/Soliel, Lady of Health

Soliel, Mistress of Healing

Tennerock/Fener, the Boar of Five Tusks

The Crippled God, King of Chains

The Hounds (of High House Shadow)

Togg (see Fanderay), the Wolf of Winter

Trake/Treach, the Tiger of Summer and Battle

Son of Darkness/Moon's Lord/Anomander Rake (Knight of High House Dark)

Treach, First Hero

THE WORLD OF SORCERY

The Warrens: (the Paths – those Warrens accessible to humans)

Denul: the Path of Healing

D'riss: the Path of Stone

Hood's Path: the Path of Death

Meanas: the Path of Shadow and Illusion

Ruse: the Path of the Sea

Rashan: the Path of Darkness

Serc: the Path of the Sky

Tennes: the Path of the Land

Thyr: the Path of Light

THE ELDER WARRENS:

Kurald Galain: the Tiste Andii Warren of Darkness

Tellann: the T'lan Imass Warren

Omtose Phellack: the Jaghut Warren

Starvald Demelain: the Tiam Warren, the First Warren

THE DECK OF DRAGONS: – The Fatid (and associated Ascendants)

High House Life

King

Queen (Queen of Dreams)

Champion

Priest

Herald

Soldier

Weaver

Mason

Virgin

High House Death

King (Hood)

Queen

Knight (once Dassem Ultor)

Magi

Herald

Soldier

Spinner

Mason

Virgin

High House Light

King

Queen

Champion

Priest

Captain

Soldier

Seamstress

Builder

Maiden

High House Dark

King

Queen

Knight (Son of Darkness)

Magi

Captain

Soldier

Weaver

Mason

Wife

High House Shadow

King (Shadowthrone/Ammanas)

Queen

Assassin (the Rope/Cotillion)

Magi

Hound

Unaligned

Oponn (the Jesters of Chance)

Obilisk (Burn)

Crown

Sceptre

Orb

Throne

Bonecaster: a shaman of the T'lan Imass

Chance: a sword dedicated to Oponn

D'ivers: a higher order of shape-shifting

Dragnipur: a sword used by Anomander Rake

Finnest: an object used as a repository of power by a Jaghut

Otataral: a magic-negating reddish ore mined from the Tanno Hills, Seven Cities

Soletaken: an order of shape-shifting

The T'orrud Cabal: the Cabal of Darujhistan

The Tyrant Kings: the ancient rulers of Darujhistan

Warrens of Chaos: the miasmic paths between the Warrens

PLACE NAMES:

Apple	A Genabackan Free City
Blackdog Forest	On the continent of Genabackis, large boreal forest on shield bedrock, site of major battles between the Malazan Empire and the

	armies of Caladan Brood and the Crimson Guard during the First Campaigns
Cloud Forest	Home of the Moranth, situated on the north-west coast of Genabackis
Darujhistan	Legendary city on Genabackis, largest and most influential of the Free Cities, situated on the south shore of Lake Azur and peopled mainly by Daru and Gadrobi populations; the only known city to use natural gas as an energy source
Dhavran	A city west of Darujhistan
Free Cities	Mercantile alliance of city-states in northern Genabackis, all but one of which has since been conquered by the Malazan Empire
Gadrobi Hills	Hill range east of Darujhistan, sparsely inhabited at present although once the homeland of the Gadrobi people
Garalt	A Genabackan Free City
Genabaris	Large Malazan-held city on northwest coast of Genabackis and principal debarkation point during the campaigns
Gerrom	A small rural town in Itko Kan
Greydog	A Genabackan city
Itko Kan	Province on the continent of Quon Tali, within the Malazan Empire
Kan	The capital city of Itko Kan
Laederon Plateau	Northern tundra of Genabackis
Lest	City-state to the east of Darujhistan
Malaz City	Island city and home of the founding

	Emperor of the Malazan Empire
Malazan Empire	An empire originating on Malaz Island off the coast of the Quon Tali continent. The original founder was the Emperor Kellanved and his cohort Dancer, both of whom were assassinated by Laseen, the present Empress. The Empire spans Quon Tali, the subcontinent of Falar, Seven Cities, and the coasts of north Genabackis Additional forays include the continents of Stratem and Korel
Meningalle Ocean	Genabackan name for Seeker's Deep
Mock's Hold	A Keep overlooking Malaz City where the Emperor and Dancer were assassinated
Moon's Spawn	A floating mountain of black basalt inside which is a city, home of the Son of Darkness and the Tiste Andii
Moranth Mountains	The mountain range encircling Cloud Forest
Mott	A Genabackan city
Mouse Quarter	An ill-fated district in Malaz City
Nathilog	Malazan-held city in north-west Genabackis
Nisst	A Genabackan Free City
One Eye Cat	A Genabackan Free City
Pale	Free City on Genabackis, recently conquered by the Malazan Empire
Pannion Domin	Emerging empire in south-east Genabackis, ruled by the Pannion Seer
Porule	A Genabackan Free City
Quon Tali	Home continent of the Malazan

	Empire
Rhivi Plain	Central plain, north Genabackis
Seeker's Deep	Malazan name for Meningalle Ocean
Setta	City on eastern coast of Genabackis
Tahlyn Mountains	Mountain range on north side of Lake Azur
Tulips	A Genabackan Free City
Unta	Capital of the Malazan Empire, on Quon Tali

DARUJISTAN AND ENVIRONS

Despot's Barbican: an ancient edifice and remnant of the Age of Tyrants

Hinter's Tower: an abandoned sorcerer's tower in the Noble District

Jammit's Worry: the east road

K'rul's Belfry/Temple: an abandoned temple in the Noble District

Phoenix Inn: a popular haunt in the Daru District

Quip's Bar: a ramshackle bar in the Lakefront District

The Estates (the Houses)

The Old Palace (Majesty Hall): present site of the Council

Worrytown: the slum outside the wall on Jammit's Worry

Steven Erikson's epic fantasy sequence, *The Malazan Book of the Fallen*, continues in *Deadhouse Gates*. To whet your appetite, here is the Prologue...

1163rd *Year of Burn's Sleep*
9th Year of the Rule of Empress Laseen
Year of the Cull

He came shambling into Judgement's Round from the Avenue of Souls, a misshapen mass of flies. Seething lumps crawled on his body in mindless migration, black and glittering and occasionally falling away in frenzied clumps that exploded into fragmented flight as they struck the cobbles.

The Thirsting Hour was coming to a close and the priest staggered in its wake, blind, deaf and silent. Honouring his god on this day the servant of Hood Lord of Death had joined his companions in stripping naked and smearing himself in the blood of executed murderers, blood that was stored in giant amphorae lining the walls of the temple's nave. The brothers had then moved in procession out onto the streets of Unta to greet the god's sprites, enjoining the mortal dance that marked the Season of Rot's last day.

The guards lining the Round parted to let the priest pass, then parted wider for the spinning, buzzing cloud that trailed him. The sky over Unta was still more grey than blue as the flies that had swept at dawn into the capital of the Malazan Empire now rose, slowly winging out over the bay toward the salt marches and sunken islands beyond the reef. Pestilence came with the Season of Rot, and the Season had come an unprecedented three times in the past ten years.

The air of the Round still buzzed, was still speckled as if filled with flying grit. Somewhere in the streets beyond a dog yelped like a thing near death, but not near enough, and close to the Round's central fountain the abandoned mule that had collapsed earlier still kicked feebly in the air. Flies had crawled into the beast through every orifice and it was bloated with gases. The animal was stubborn by its breed and was now over an hour in dying. As the priest staggered sightlessly past, flies rose from it in a swift curtain to join those already enshrouding him.

It was clear to Felisin from where she and the others waited that the priest of Hood was striding directly towards her. His eyes were ten thousand eyes, but she was certain they were all fixed on her. Yet even this growing horror did little to stir the numbness that lay like a smothering blanket over her mind; she was aware of it rising inside but the awareness seemed more a memory of fear than fear now alive within her.

She barely recalled the first Season of Rot she'd lived through, but had clear memories of the second one. Just under three years ago, she had witnessed this day secure in the family estate, in a solid house with its windows shuttered and cloth-sealed, the braziers set outside the doors and on the courtyard's high broken glass-rimmed walls billowing the acrid smoke of istaarl leaves. The last day of the Season and its Thirsting Hour had been a time of remote revulsion for her, irritating and inconvenient but nothing more. Back then she'd given little thought to the city's countless beggars and the stray animals bereft of shelter, or even of the poorer residents who were subsequently press-ganged into clean-up crews for days afterward.

The same city, but a different world.

Felisin wondered if the guards would make any move toward the priest as he came closer to the Cull's victims. She and the others in the line were the charges of the Empress now – Laseen's responsibility – and the priest's path could be seen as blind and random, the imminent collision one of chance rather than design, although in her bones Felisin knew different. Would the helmed guards step forward, seek to guide the priest to one side, lead him safely through the Round?

'I think not,' said the man squatting on her right. His half-closed eyes, buried deep in their orbits, flashed with something that might have been amusement. 'Seen you flicking your gaze, guards to priest, priest to guards.'

The big, silent man on her left slowly rose to his feet, pulling the chain with him. Felisin winced as the shackle yanked at her when the man folded his arms across his bare, scarred chest. He glared at the approaching priest but said nothing.

'What does he want with me?' Felisin asked in a whisper. 'What have I done to earn a priest of Hood's attention?'

The squatting man rocked back on his heels, tilting his face into the late afternoon sun. 'Queen of Dreams, is this self-centred youth I hear from those full, sweet lips? Or just the usual stance of noble blood around which the universe revolves? Answer me, I pray, fickle Queen!'

Felisin scowled. 'I felt better when I thought you asleep – or dead.'

'Dead men do not squat, lass, they sprawl. Hood's priest comes not for you but for me.'

She faced him then, the chain rattling between them. He looked more a sunken-eyed toad than a man. He was bald, his face webbed in tattooing, minute, black, square-etched symbols hidden within an overall pattern covering skin like a wrinkled scroll. He was naked but for a ragged loincloth, its dye a faded red. Flies crawled all over him; reluctant to leave their sated thirst they danced on – but not, Felisin realized, to Hood's bleak orchestration. The tattooed pattern covered the man – the boar's face overlying his own, the intricate maze of script-threaded, curled fur winding down his arms, covering his exposed thighs and shins, the detailed hoofs etched into the skin of his feet. Felisin had until now been too self-absorbed, too numb with shock to pay any attention to her companions in the chain-line: this man was a priest of Fener, the Boar of Summer, and the flies seemed to know it, understand it enough to alter their frenzied motion. She watched with morbid fascination as they gathered at the stumps at the ends of the man's wrists, the old scar tissue the only place on him unclaimed by Fener, but the paths the sprites took to those stumps touched not a single

tattooed line. The flies danced a dance of avoidance – but for all that, they were eager to dance.

The priest of Fener had been ankle-shackled last in the line. Everyone else had the narrow iron bands fastened around their wrists. His feet were wet with blood and the flies hovered there but did not land. She saw his eyes flick open as the sun's light was suddenly blocked.

Hood's priest had arrived. Chain stirred as the man on Felisin's left drew back as far as the links allowed. The wall at her back felt hot, the tiles painted with scenes of imperial pageantry now slick through the thin weave of her slave tunic. Felisin stared at the fly-shrouded creature standing wordless before the squatting priest of Fener. She could see nothing of exposed flesh, nothing of the man himself – the flies had claimed all of him and beneath them he lived in darkness where even the sun's heat could not touch him. The cloud around him spread out now and Felisin shrank back as countless cold insect legs touched her legs, crawled swiftly up her thighs. She pulled her tunic's hem close around her, clamping her legs tight.

The priest of Fener spoke, his wide face split into a humourless grin. 'The Thirsting Hour's well past, acolyte. Go back to your temple.'

Hood's servant made no reply but it seemed the buzzing changed pitch until the music of the wings vibrated in Felisin's bones.

The priest's deep eyes narrowed and his tone shifted. 'Ah, well now. Indeed I was once a servant of Fener but no longer, not for years – Fener's touch cannot be scrubbed from my skin. Yet it seems that while the Boar of Summer has no love for me, he has even less for you.'

Felisin felt something shiver in her soul as the buzzing rapidly shifted, formed words that she could understand. *Secret* ... to *show* ... *now*...

'Go on then,' the once-servant of Fener growled. 'Show me.'

Perhaps Fener acted then, the swatting hand of a furious god – Felisin would remember the moment and think on it often – or the secret was the mocking of immortals, a joke far beyond her understanding, but at that moment the rising tide of horror within her broke free, the numbness of her

soul seared away as the flies exploded outward, dispersing in all directions to reveal... no-one.

The once-priest of Fener flinched as if struck, his eyes wide. From across the Round a half-dozen guards cried out, wordless sounds punched from their throats. Chains snapped as others in the line jolted as if to flee, the iron loops set in the wall snatched taut, but the loops held as did the chains. The guards rushed forward and the line shrank back into submission.

'Now that,' the tattooed man shakily muttered, 'was uncalled for.'

An hour passed, an hour in which the mystery, shock and horror of Hood's priest sank down within Felisin to become but one more layer, the latest but not the last in what had become an unending nightmare. An acolyte of Hood ... who was not there. The buzzing of wings that formed words. Was *that Hood himself? Had the* Lord *of Death come to walk among mortals? And why stand before a once-priest of Fener – what was the message behind the revelation?*

But slowly the questions faded in her mind, the numbness seeping back, the return of cold despair. The Empress had culled the Nobility, stripped the Houses and families of their wealth, followed by a summary accusation and conviction of treason that had ended in chains. And yet the ex-priest on her right and the huge, bestial man with all the makings of a common criminal on her left – clearly neither one could claim noble blood. She laughed softly, startling both men.

'Has Hood's secret revealed itself to you, then, lass?' the ex-priest asked.

'No.'

'What do you find so amusing?'

She shook her head. I *had expected to find myself in good company, how's that for an upturned thought? There you have it, the very attitude the peasants hungered to tear down, the* very *same fuel the Empress has touched to flame—*

'Child!'

The voice was that of an aged woman, still haughty but with an air of desperate yearning. Felisin closed her eyes briefly, then straightened and looked along the line to the gaunt old woman beyond the thug. The woman was wearing her nightclothes, torn and smeared. With *noble blood, no less.*

'Lady Gaesen.'

The old woman reached out a shaking hand. 'Yes! Wife to Lord Hilrac! I am Lady Gaesen...' The words came as if she'd forgotten who she was, and now she frowned through the cracked make-up covering her wrinkles and her red-shot eyes fixed on Felisin. 'I know you,' she hissed. 'House of Paran. Youngest daughter. Felisin!'

Felisin went cold. She turned away, stared straight ahead out into the compound where the guards stood leaning on pikes passing flasks of ale between them and waving away the last of the flies. A cart had arrived for the mule, four ash-smeared men clambering down from its bed with ropes and gaffs. Beyond the walls encircling the Round rose Unta's painted spires and domes. She longed for the shadowed streets between them, longed for the pampered life of a week ago, Sebry barking harsh commands at her as she led her favourite mare through the paces. And she would look up, as she guided the mare in a delicate, precise turn, to see the row of green-leafed leadwoods separating the riding ground from the family vineyards.

Beside her the thug grunted. 'Hood's feet, the bitch has some sense of humour.'

Which bitch? Felisin wondered, but she managed to hold her expression even as she lost the comfort of her memories.

The ex-priest stirred. 'Sisterly spat, is it?' He paused, then dryly added, 'Seems a bit extreme.'

The thug grunted again and leaned forward, his shadow draping Felisin. 'Defrocked priest, are you? Not like the Empress to do any temples a favour.'

'She didn't. My loss of piety was long ago. I'm sure the Empress would rather I'd stayed in the cloister.'

'As if she'd care,' the thug said derisively as he settled back into his pose.

Lady Gaesen rattled, 'You must speak with *her,* Felisin! An appeal! I have rich friends—'

The thug's grunt turned into a bark. 'Farther up the line, hag, that's where you'll find your rich friends!'

Felisin just shook her head. Speak *with her? It's been months. Not even when Father died.*

A silence followed, dragging on, approaching the silence that had existed before this spate of babble, but then the ex-priest cleared his throat, spat and muttered, 'Not worth looking for salvation in a woman who's just following orders, Lady, never mind that one being this girl's sister—'

Felisin winced then snapped a glare on the ex-priest. 'You presume—'

'He ain't presuming nothing,' growled the thug. 'Forget what's in the blood, what's supposed to be in it by your slant on things. This is the work of the Empress. Maybe you think it's personal, maybe you have to think that, being what you are—'

'What I am?' Felisin laughed harshly. 'What House claims you as kin?'

The thug grinned. 'The House of Shame. What of it? Yours ain't looking any less shabby.'

'As I thought,' Felisin said, ignoring the truth of his last observation with difficulty. She glowered at the guards. 'What's happening? Why are we just sitting here?'

The ex-priest spat again. 'The Thirsting Hour's past. The mob outside needs organizing.' He glanced up at her from under the shelf of his brows. 'The peasants need to be roused. We're the first, girl, and the example's got to be established. What happens here in Unta is going to rattle every noble-born in the Empire.'

'Nonsense!' Lady Gaesen snapped. 'We shall be well-treated. The Empress shall have to treat us well—'

The thug grunted a third time – what passed for laughter, Felisin realized – and said, 'If stupidity was a crime, lady, you would've been arrested years ago. The ogre's right. Not many of us are going to make it to the slave ships. This parade down Colonnade Avenue is going to be one long bloodbath. Mind you,' he added, eyes narrowing on the guards, 'old Baudin ain't going to be torn apart by any mob of peasants...'

Felisin felt real fear stirring in her stomach. She fought off a shiver. 'Mind if I stay in your shadow, Baudin?'

The man looked down at her. 'You're a bit plump for my tastes.' He turned away, then added, 'But you do what you like.'

The ex-priest leaned close. 'Thinking on it, girl, this rivalry of yours ain't in the league of tattle-tails and scratch-fights. Likely your sister wants to be sure you—'

'She's Adjunct Tavore,' Felisin cut in. 'She's not my sister anymore. She renounced our House at the call of the Empress.'

'Even so, I've an inkling it's still personal.'

Felisin scowled. 'How would you know anything about it?'

The man made a slight, ironic bow. 'Thief once, then priest, now historian. I well know the tense position the nobility finds itself in.'

Felisin's eyes slowly widened and she cursed herself for her stupidity. Even Baudin – who could not have helped but overhear – leaned forward for a searching stare. 'Heboric,' he said. 'Heboric Light Touch.'

Heboric raised his arms. 'As light as ever, son.'

'You wrote that revised history,' Felisin said. 'Committed treason—'

Heboric's wiry brows rose in mock alarm. 'Gods forbid! A philosophic divergence of opinions, nothing more! Duiker's own words at the trial – in my defence, Fener bless him.'

'But the Empress wasn't listening,' Baudin said, grinning. 'After all, you called her a murderer, and then had the gall to say she bungled the job!'

'Found an illicit copy, did you?'

Baudin blinked.

'In any case,' Heboric continued to Felisin, 'it's my guess your sister the Adjunct plans on you getting to the slave ships in one piece. Your brother disappearing on Genabackis took the life out of your father ... so I've heard,' he added, grinning. 'But it was the rumours of treason that put spurs to your sister, wasn't it? Clearing the family name and all that—'

'You make it sound reasonable, Heboric,' Felisin said, hearing the bitterness in her voice but not caring anymore. 'We differed in our opinions, Tavore and I, and now you see the result.'

'Your opinions of what, precisely?'

She did not reply.

There was a sudden stirring in the line. The guards straightened and swung to face the Round's West Gate. Felisin paled as she saw her sister – *Adjunct* Tavore, now, heir to Lorn who'd died in Darujhistan – ride up on her stallion, a beast bred out of Paran stables, no less. Beside her was the ever-present T'amber, a beautiful young woman whose long tawny mane gave substance to her name. Where she'd come from was anyone's guess, but she was now Tavore's personal aide. Behind these two rode a score of officers and a company of heavy cavalry, the soldiers looking exotic, foreign.

'Touch of irony,' Heboric muttered, eyeing the horse-soldiers.

Baudin jutted his head forward and spat. 'Red Swords, the bloodless bastards.'

The historian threw the man an amused glance. 'Travelled well in your profession, Baudin? Seen the seawalls of Aren, have you?'

The man shifted uneasily, then shrugged. 'Stood a deck or two in my time, ogre. Besides,' he added, 'the rumour of them's been in the city a week or more.'

There was a stirring from the Red Sword troop, and Felisin saw mailed hands close on weapon-grips, peaked helms turning as one toward the Adjunct. *Sister Tavore, did our brother's disappearance cut you so deep? How great his failing you must imagine, to seek this recompense ... and then, to make your loyalty absolute, you chose between me and Mother for the symbolic sacrifice. Didn't you realize that Hood stood on the side of both choices? At least Mother is with, her beloved husband now ...* She watched as Tavore scanned her guard briefly, then say something to T'amber, who edged her own mount towards the East Gate.

Baudin grunted one more time. 'Look lively, the endless hour's about to begin.'

It was one thing to accuse the Empress of murder; it was quite another to predict her next move. *If only they'd heeded my warning.* Heboric winced as they shuffled forward, the shackles cutting hard against his ankles.

People of civilized countenance made much of exposing the soft underbellies of their psyche – effete and sensitive were the brands of finer breeding. It was easy for them, safe, and that was the whole point, after all: a statement of coddled opulence that burned the throats of the poor more than any ostentatious show of wealth.

Heboric had said as much in his treatise, and could now admit a bitter admiration for the Empress and for Adjunct Tavore, Laseen's instrument in this. The excessive brutality of the midnight arrests – doors battered down, families dragged from their beds amidst wailing servants – provided the first layer of shock. Dazed by sleep deprivation, the nobles were trussed up and decked in shackles to stand before a drunken magistrate and a jury of beggars dragged in from the streets. A sour and obvious mockery of justice that stripped away the few remaining expectations of civil behaviour – stripped away civilization itself, leaving nothing but the chaos of savagery.

Shock layered on shock, a rending of those fine underbellies. Tavore knew her own kind, knew their weaknesses and was ruthless in exploiting them. What could drive a person to such viciousness?

The poor folk mobbed the streets when they heard the details, screaming adoration for their Empress. Carefully triggered riots, looting and slaughter followed, raging through the Noble District, and hunting down those few selected highborns who hadn't been arrested – enough to whet the mob's bloodlust, faces to focus on with rage and hate, then the re-imposition of order, lest the city take flame.

The Empress made few mistakes. She'd used the opportunity to round up malcontents and unaligned academics, to close the fist of military presence on the capital, drumming the need for more troops, more recruits, more protection against the treasonous scheming of the noble class. The seized assets paid for this martial burgeoning. An exquisite move even if forewarned, rippling out with the force of Imperial Decree through the Empire, the cruel rage now sweeping through each city.

Bitter admiration. Heboric kept finding the need to spit, something he hadn't done since his cut-purse days in the Mouse Quarter of Malaz City. He could see those layers of shock written on most of the faces in the chain-line. Faces above nightclothes mostly, grimy and filthy from the pits, leaving their wearers bereft: of even the moral armour of regular clothing. Dishevelled hair, stunned expressions, broken poses – everything the mob beyond the Round lusted to see, hungered to flail—

Welcome to the streets, Heboric thought to himself as the guards prodded the line into motion, the Adjunct looking on, straight in her high saddle and thin face drawn in until nothing but lines remained – the slit of her eyes, the brackets around her uncurved, almost lipless mouth. *Damn, but she* wasn't *born with much, was she?* The looks went to her young sister, to the lass stumbling a step ahead of him.

Heboric's eyes fixed on Adjunct Tavore. Curious, seeking something – a flicker of malicious pleasure, maybe – her icy gaze swept the line and lingered for the briefest of moments on her sister. But the pause was all she revealed, a recognition acknowledged, nothing more. The gaze swept on.

The guards opened the East Gate two hundred paces ahead, near the front of the chained line. A roar poured through that ancient arched passageway, a wave of sound that buffeted soldier and prisoner alike, bouncing off the

high walls and rising up amidst an explosion of terrified pigeons from the upper eaves. The sound of chaotic flapping wings drifted down like polite applause, although to Heboric it seemed that he alone appreciated that ironic touch of the gods. Not to be denied a gesture, he managed a slight bow.

Hood *keep his damned secrets. Here, Fener you old sow, it's that itch* I *could never scratch. Look on, now, closely, see what becomes of your wayward son...*

Some part of Felisin's mind held onto sanity, held with a brutal grip in the face of a chaotic maelstrom. Soldiers lined Colonnade Avenue in ranks three deep, but again and again the mob seemed to find weak spots in that bristling line. She found herself observing, clinically even, as hands tore at her, fists pummelled her, blurred faces lunged at her with gobs of spit. And even as sanity held within her, so too a pair of steady arms encircled her – arms without hands, the ends scarred and suppurating, arms that pushed her forward, ever forward. No-one touched the priest. No-one dared. While ahead was Baudin – more horrifying than the mob itself.

He killed effortlessly. He tossed bodies aside with contempt, roaring, gesturing, beckoning. Even the soldiers stared beneath their ridged helmets, heads turning at his taunts, hands tightening on pike or sword hilt.

Baudin, laughing Baudin, his nose smashed by a well-flung brick, stones bouncing from him, his slave tunic in rags and soaked with blood and spit. Every body that darted within his reach he grasped, twisted, bent and broke. The only pause in his stride came when something happened ahead, some breach in the soldiery – or when Lady Gaesen faltered. He'd grasp her arms under the shoulders, none too gently, then propel her forward, swearing all the while.

Some wave of fear swept ahead of him, a touch of the terror inflicted turning back on the mob. The number of attackers diminished, although the bricks flew in a constant barrage, some hitting, most missing.

The march through the city continued. Felisin's ears rang painfully. She heard everything through a daze of sound, but her eyes saw clearly, seeking

and finding – all too often – images she would never forget.

The gates were in sight when the most savage breach occurred. The soldiers seemed to melt away and the tide of fierce hunger swept into the street, engulfing the prisoners.

Felisin caught Heboric's grunting words close behind her as he shoved hard: 'This is the one, then.'

Baudin roared. Bodies crowded in, hands tearing, nails clawing. Felisin's last shreds of clothing were torn away. A hand closed on a fistful of her hair, yanked savagely, twisting her head around, seeking the crack of vertebrae. She heard screaming, realized it came from her own throat. A bestial snarl sounded behind her and she felt the hand clench spasmodically, then it was gone. More screaming filled her ears.

A strong momentum caught them, pulling or pushing – she couldn't tell – and Heboric's face came into view, his mouth spitting bloody skin. All at once a space cleared around Baudin. He crouched, a torrent of dock curses bellowing from his mashed lips. His right ear had been torn off, taking with it hair, skin and flesh. The bone of his temple glistened wetly. Broken bodies lay around him, few moving. At his feet was Lady Gaesen. Baudin held her by the hair, pulling her face into view. The moment seemed to freeze, the world closing in to this single place.

Baudin bared his teeth and laughed. 'I'm no whimpering noble,' he growled, facing the crowd. 'What do you want? You want the blood of a noblewoman?'

The mob screamed, reaching out eager hands. Baudin laughed again. 'We pass through, you hear me?' He straightened, dragging Lady Gaesen's head upward.

Felisin couldn't tell if the old woman was conscious. Her eyes were closed, the expression peaceful – almost youthful – beneath the smeared dirt and bruises. Perhaps she was dead. Felisin prayed that it was so. Something was about to happen, something to condense this nightmare into a single image. Tension held the air.

'She's yours!' Baudin screamed, his other hand grasping the Lady's chin. He twisted her head around. The neck snapped, the body sagged, twitching. Baudin wrapped a length of chain around her neck. He pulled it taut, then began sawing. Blood showed, making the chain look like a mangled scarf.

Felisin stared in horror.

'Fener have mercy,' Heboric breathed.

The crowd was stunned silent, withdrawing even in their bloodlust, shrinking back. A soldier appeared, helmetless, his young face white, his eyes fixed on Baudin, his steps ceasing. Beyond him the glistening peaked helms and broad blades of the Red Swords flashed above the crowd as the horsemen slowly pushed their way towards the scene.

No movement save the sawing chain. No breath save Baudin's grunting snorts. Whatever riot continued to rage beyond this place, it seemed a thousand leagues away.

Felisin watched the woman's head jerk back and forth, a mockery of life's animation. She remembered Lady Gaesen, haughty, imperious, beyond her years of beauty and seeking stature in its stead. What other choice? Many, but it didn't matter now. Had she been a gentle, kindly grandmother, it would not have mattered, would not have changed the mind-numbing horror of this moment.

The head came away with a sobbing sound. Baudin's teeth glimmered as he stared at the crowd. 'We had a deal,' he grated. 'Here's what you want, something to remember this day by.' He flung Lady Gaesen's head into the mob, a whirl of hair and threads of blood. Screams answered its unseen landing.

More soldiers appeared – backed by the Red Swords – moving slowly, pushing at the still silent onlookers. Peace was being restored, all along the line in all places but this one, violently, without quarter. As people began to die under sword strokes, the rest fled.

The prisoners who had filed out of the arena had numbered around three hundred. Felisin looked up the line, her first sight of what remained. Some

shackles held only forearms, others were completely empty. Under a hundred prisoners remained on their feet. Many on the paving stones writhed, screaming in pain; the rest did not move at all.

Baudin glared at the nearest knot of soldiers. 'Likely timing, tin-heads.'

Heboric spat heavily, his face twisting as he glared at the thug. 'Imagined you'd buy your way out, did you, Baudin? Give them what they want. But it was wasted, wasn't it? The soldiers were coming. She could have lived—'

Baudin slowly turned, his face a sheet of blood. 'To what end, priest?'

'Was that your line of reasoning? She would've died in the hold anyway?'

Baudin showed his teeth, and said slowly, 'I just hate making deals with bastards.'

Felisin stared at the three-foot length of chain between herself and Baudin. A thousand thoughts could have followed, link by link – what she had been, what she was now; the prison she'd discovered, inside and out, merged as vivid memory – but all she thought, all she said, was: 'Don't make any more deals, Baudin.'

His eyes narrowed on her, her words and tone reaching him, somehow, someway.

Heboric straightened, a hard look in his eyes as he studied her. Felisin turned away, half in defiance, half in shame.

A moment later the soldiers – having cleared the line of the dead – pushed them along, out through the gate, onto the East Road towards the pier town of Luckless. Where Adjunct Tavore and her retinue waited, as did the slave ships of Aren.

Farmers and peasants lined the road, displaying nothing of the frenzy that had gripped their cousins in the city. Felisin saw in their faces a dull sorrow, a passion born of different scars. She could not understand where it came from, and she knew that her ignorance was the difference between her and them. She also knew, in her bruises, scratches and helpless nakedness, that her lessons had begun.

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A Novel of the Malazan Empire
By Ian C. Esslemont

'The first instalment of the shared world that we had both envisioned'
STEVEN ERIKSON

Malaz gave a great empire its name, but now this island and its city amount to little more than a sleepy backwater. Until this night.

Because this night there is to be a convergence, the once-in-a-generation appearance of a Shadow Moon – an occasion that threatens the good people of Malaz with demon hounds and other, darker things.

Also it is prophesied that the Emperor Kellanved will return this night, and there are those who would prevent that happening at any cost. As factions within the Empire draw up battle lines, an ancient presence begins its all-out assault upon the island. Witnesses to these cataclysmic events include a thief called Kiska, and Temper, a war-weary veteran. Although they do not know it, they each have a part to play in a confrontation that will determine not only the fate of Malaz City but also of the world beyond ...

Drawing on events touched on in the prologue of Steven Erikson's landmark fantasy *Gardens of the* Moon, *Night of Knives* is a momentous chapter in the unfolding story of the extraordinarily-imagined world of Malaz.

'A hugely promising start... Esslemont triumphs'

DEATHRAY

'Telling a story set largely over just one terrifying night, it pulverizes you with an economy that is rare in fantasy'

SFX

'Esslemont handles action and brooding atmosphere equally well'

STARBURST

'Fast-paced storytelling ... a clear, enjoyable reading experience'

SFFWORLD

9780553818291

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Then an assassin, sent from the Mein – a race exiled long ago to an ice-locked stronghold in the frozen north – strikes, and the Mein unleash surprise attacks against their old oppressor. Mortally wounded, Leodan puts into play a plan to enable his children to escape, to survive and to fulfil their destinies.

And so begins an epic quest – to avenge a father's death and restore an empire, *this* time on the basis of universal freedom.

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'Entertaining and engaging ... If *The War with the Mein* is an indication of what is to come in this epic saga, Durham could be making a very big name for himself SFFWORLD

'Vastly entertaining ... Will good win out over evil? In Durham's morally ambiguous world, the uncertainty is part of the thrill' STRANGEHORIZONS

9780385614474

COMING FROM DOUBLEDAY IN MAY

DEATH'S HEAD
By David Gunn

'I was hooked from page two, then hooked, landed, gutted and fried ... Yeah! *Starship Troopers* meets Schwarzenneger's *Commando!'*

NEAL ASHER

Few survive the cage. Fewer still live to face the whipping post. But stubborn, insubordinate son-of-a-bitch Sven Tveskoeg does. As this ex-sergeant in the legion é*trangere* feels the first lash fall, he sees the desert tribes attack – and watches them slaughter his comrades before his comrades can kill *him* ...

Rescued from certain death, Sven joins the tribes. However his ruthless skills have come to the attention of an elite special ops force, the infamous Death's Head.

They want Sven to help them out with a little 'local difficulty'. He knows he's a pawn in an altogether more dangerous game – and pawns have a habit of being sacrificed. But Sven is nobody's sacrifice. And even a pawn can checkmate a king ...

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DEATH RAY

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Deadhouse Gates

A Tale of the
Malazan Book of the Fallen

STEVEN ERIKSON



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This novel is dedicated to two gentlemen:
David Thomas Jr, who welcomed me to
England with an introduction to a certain
agent; and Patrick Walsh, the agent he
introduced me to. There has been a lot
of faith shown over the years, and I
thank you both.

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SEVEN CITIES

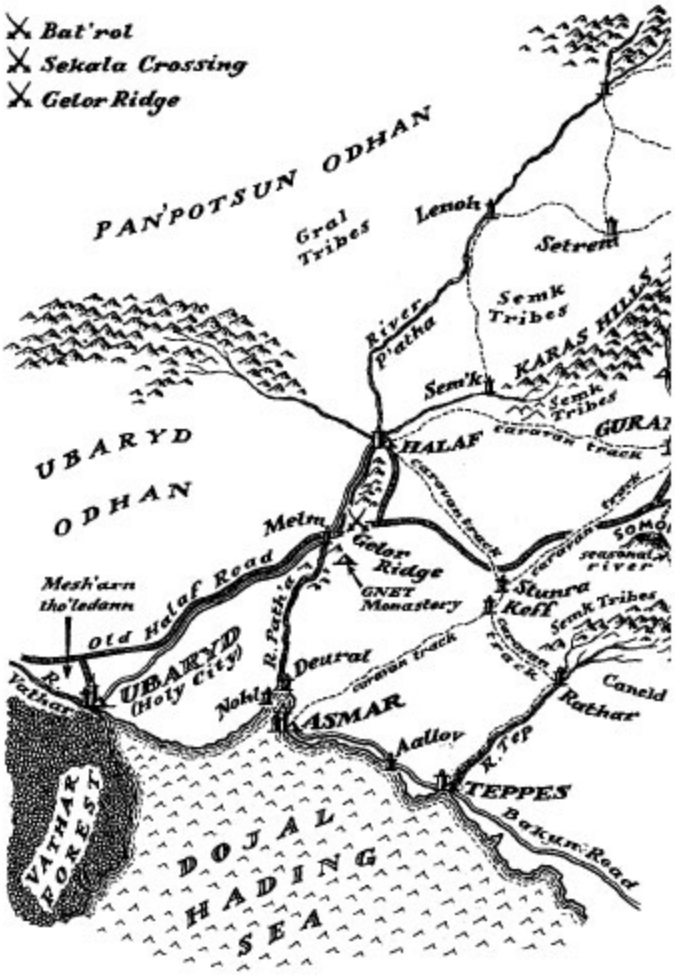
The Malazan Empire ca1160 Burn's Sleep




SEA of KALTEPE
KADESH
BANDIKO DESERT
BANDIKO SEA
KARAKARANG
TALGAI SEA
Canhasan
Belbasi
Karekitch
Gallad
Rutu Jelba
SEA of GALLADA
SEA
OLONETZ BRAE
SKARA BRAE
OTATARAL SEA
OTATARAL DESERT
Nyasa
Nioh
Kansu
Longchan
Estarb
Jeyo
MTNS.
ERHLITAN
Abol Tapur
KARAKU
Lato Revat
Panpot'sun
PATH'APUR MTNS.
Dosin Pati
Mersin
KARASHIMESH
SIALK ODHAN
ODHAN
Hissar
Sialk
Omari
UBARYD ODHAN
Halaf
Guran
Caron
Tepasi
MTNS.
VATHAR FOREST
Asmar
CARON MTNS
SAHUL SEA
Teppes
UBARYD
Bylan
Bakun
Jamdat
Geleen
DOJAL
HADING SEA
SEEKER'S DEEP
Tarxian
Dhebel
Sarsa
AREN
To Quon Tali
To Falari Isles

CHAIN of DOGS

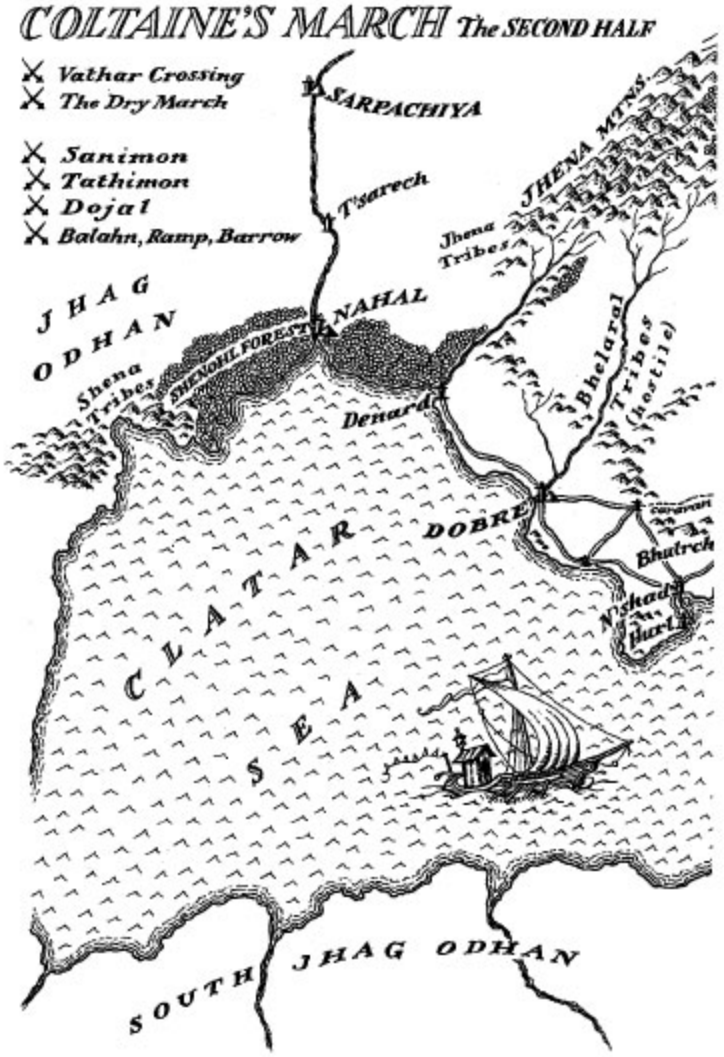
COLTAINE'S MARCH The FIRST HALF

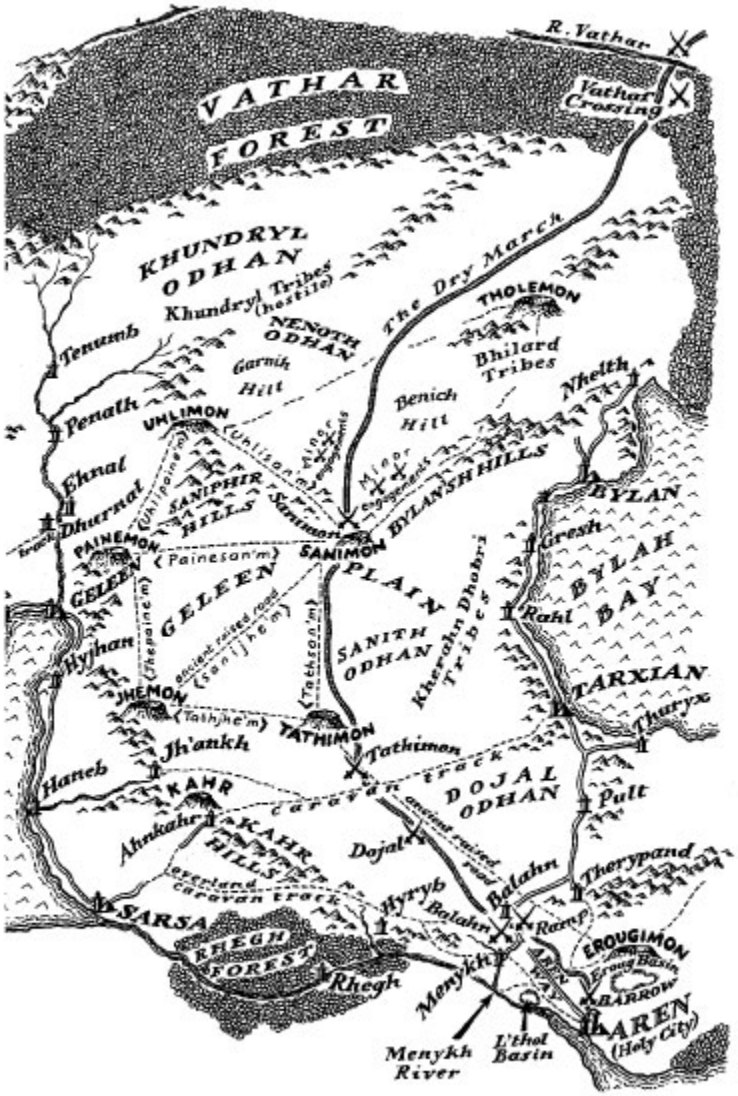



Tyal
Hara
Vrek
KARASCHIMESH
(Holy City)
RUNDESH
HILLS
Tupur Road
Uthor
Dabrahi Tribes
HISSAR
SIALK
ODHAN
(Plain)
Ebh
Narthi
Vitrat
SIALK
KARAS
CARON
TEPASI
CA'MON
Gilar Oasis
KALRMON
QUAL
Monastery
Bakra
SEA
Manot
Selbha
Sekal
IRISHIMON
Dryj Spring
LADOR
LADORMON HILLS
SAHUL
SEA
Ohval
Sekala
Crossing
Tithan
Tribes
Pit
caravan track
Lod
MARKMON
CARON
MOUNTAINS
Tithan
Tribes
(Hostile
to
Outsiders)
BAKUTAIA
FOREST
Tribes
Verj
R. Bekun

CHAIN of DOGS

COLTAINE'S MARCH The SECOND HALF




R. Vathar
VATHAR FOREST
Vathar Crossing
KHUNDRYL ODHAN
Khundryl Tribes (hostile)
The Dry March
THOLEMON
Bhilard Tribes
NENOTH ODHAN
Tenumb
Garnik Hill
Penath
UHLIMON
Benich Hill
Nhelth
Ehnal
Minor engagements
SANIPHIR HILLS
BYLAN
Dhurnal track
PAINEMON
SANIMON
BYLANSH HILLS
Gresh
GELEEN
(Painesan'm)
PLAIN
BYLAH BAY
Rahl
Hyhan
SANITH ODHAN
Kherahn Dhobri Tribes
TARXIAN
JHEMON
(Tathjhe'm)
TATHIMON
Tathimon
Thuryx
Jh'ankh
Haneb
KAHR
caravan track
DOJAL ODHAN
Pult
Ahnkahr
KAHR HILLS
Dojate
ancient ruined road
Therypand
overland caravan track
Hyryb
Balahn
Balahn Ramp
SARSA
EROUGIMON
RHEGH FOREST
Rhegh
Menykh
Erougi Basin
BARROW
LAREN (Holy City)
Menykh River
L'thol Basin

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ON THE PATH OF THE HAND

Icarium, a mixed-blood Jaghut wanderer

Mappo, his Trell companion

Iskaral Pust, a High Priest of Shadow

Ryllandaras, the White Jackal, a D'ivers

Messremb, a Soletaken

Gryllen, a D'ivers

Mogora, a D'ivers

THE MALAZANS

Felisin, youngest daughter of House Paran

Heboric Light Touch, exiled historian and ex-priest of Fener

Baudin, companion to Felisin and Heboric

Fiddler, 9th Squad, Bridgeburners

Crokus, a visitor from Darujhistan

Apsalar, 9th Squad, Bridgeburners

Kalam, a corporal in the 9th Squad, Bridgeburners

Duiker, Imperial Historian

Kulp, cadre mage, 7th Army

Mallick Rel, chief adviser to the High Fist of the Seven Cities

Sawark, commander of the guard in the Otataral mining camp, Skullcup

Pella, a soldier stationed at Skullcup

Pormqual, High Fist of the Seven Cities, in Aren

Blistig, Commander of Aren Guard

Topper, Commander of the Claw

Lull, a captain in the Sialk Marines

Chenned, a captain in the 7th Army

Sulmar, a captain in the 7th Army

List, a corporal in the 7th Army

Mincer, a sapper

Cuttle, a sapper

Gesler, a corporal in the Coastal Guard

Stormy, a soldier in the Coastal Guard

Truth, a recruit in the Coastal Guard

Squint, a bowman

Pearl, a Claw

Captain Keneb, a refugee

Selv, Keneb's wife

Minala, Selv's sister

Kesen, Keneb and Selv's first-born son

Vaneb, Keneb and Selv's second-born son

Captain, owner and commander of the trader craft *Ragstopper*

Bent, a Wickan cattle-dog

Roach, a Hengese lapdog

WICKANS

Coltaine, Fist, 7th Army

Temul, a young lancer

Sormo E'nath, a warlock

Nil, a warlock

Nether, a warlock

Bult, a veteran commander and Coltaine's uncle

THE RED BLADES

Baria Setral (Dosin Pali)

Mesker Setral, his brother (Dosin Pali)

Tene Baralta (Ehrlitan)

Aralt Arpat (Ehrlitan)

Lostara Yil (Ehrlitan)

NOBLES ON THE CHAIN OF DOGS (MALAZAN)

Nethpara

Lenestro

Pullyk Alar

Tumlit

FOLLOWERS OF THE APOCALYPSE

Sha'ik, leader of the rebellion

Leoman, captain in the Raraku Apocalypse

Toblakai, a bodyguard and warrior in the Raraku Apocalypse

Febryl, a mage and elder adviser to Sha'ik

Korbolo Dom, renegade Fist leading the Odhan army

Kamist Reloe, High Mage with the Odhan army

L'oric, a mage with the Raraku Apocalypse

Bidithal, a mage with the Raraku Apocalypse

Mebra, a spy in Ehrlitan

OTHERS

Salk Elan, a traveller on the seas

Shan, a Hound of Shadow

Gear, a Hound of Shadow

Blind, a Hound of Shadow

Baran, a Hound of Shadow

Rood, a Hound of Shadow

Moby, a familiar

Hentos Ilm, a T'lan Imass Bonecaster

Legana Breed, a T'lan Imass

Olar Ethil, a T'lan Imass Bonecaster

Kimloc, a Tanno Spiritwalker

Beneth, a crime lord

Irp, a small servant

Rudd, an equally small servant

Apt, an aptorian demon

Panek, a child

Karpolan Demesand, a merchant

Bula, an innkeeper

Cotillion, patron god of assassins

Shadowthrone, Ruler of High House Shadow

Rellock, a servant

Prologue

What see you in the horizon's bruised smear
That cannot be blotted out
By your raised hand?

The Bridgeburners
Toe the Younger

1163rd Year of Burn's Sleep
Ninth Year of the Rule of Empress Laseen
Year of the Cull

He came shambling into Judgement's Round from the Avenue of Souls, a misshapen mass of flies. Seething lumps crawled on his body in mindless migration, black and glittering and occasionally falling away in frenzied clumps that exploded into fragmented flight as they struck the cobbles. The Thirsting Hour was coming to a close and the priest staggered in its wake, blind, deaf and silent. Honouring his god on this day, the servant of Hood, Lord of Death, had joined his companions in stripping naked and smearing himself in the blood of executed murderers, blood that was stored in giant amphorae lining the walls of the temple's nave. The brothers had then moved in procession out onto the streets of Unta to greet the god's sprites, enjoining the mortal dance that marked the Season of Rot's last day.

The guards lining the Round parted to let the priest pass, then parted further for the spinning, buzzing cloud that trailed him. The sky over Unta was still more grey than blue, as the flies that had swept at dawn into the capital of the Malazan Empire now rose, slowly winging out over the bay towards the salt marshes and sunken islands beyond the reef. Pestilence came with the Season of Rot, and the Season had come an unprecedented three times in the past ten years.

The air of the Round still buzzed, was still speckled as if filled with flying grit. Somewhere in the streets beyond a dog yelped like a thing near death but not near enough, and close to the Round's central fountain the abandoned mule that had collapsed earlier still kicked feebly in the air. Flies had crawled into the beast through every orifice and it was now bloated with gases. The animal, stubborn by its breed, was now over an hour in dying. As the priest staggered sightlessly past, flies rose from the mule in a swift curtain to join those already enshrouding him.

It was clear to Felisin from where she and the others waited that the priest of Hood was striding directly towards her. His eyes were ten thousand eyes, but she was certain they were all fixed on her. Yet even this growing horror did little to stir the numbness that lay like a smothering blanket over her

mind; she was aware of it rising inside but the awareness seemed more a memory of fear than fear now alive within her.

She barely recalled the first Season of Rot she'd lived through, but had clear memories of the second one. Just under three years ago, she had witnessed this day secure in the family estate, in a solid house with its windows shuttered and cloth-sealed, with the braziers set outside the doors and on the courtyard's high, broken-glass-rimmed walls billowing the acrid smoke of istaarl leaves. The last day of the Season and its Thirsting Hour had been a time of remote revulsion for her, irritating and inconvenient but nothing more. Then she'd given little thought to the city's countless beggars and the stray animals bereft of shelter, or even to the poorer residents who were subsequently press-ganged into cleanup crews for days afterwards.

The same city, but a different world.

Felisin wondered if the guards would make any move towards the priest as he came closer to the Cull's victims. She and the others in the line were the charges of the Empress now – Laseen's responsibility – and the priest's path could be seen as blind and random, the imminent collision one of chance rather than design, although in her bones Felisin knew differently. Would the helmed guards step forward, seek to guide the priest to one side, lead him safely through the Round?

'I think not,' said the man squatting on her right. His half-closed eyes, buried deep in their sockets, flashed with something that might have been amusement. 'Seen you flicking your gaze, guards to priest, priest to guards.'

The big, silent man on her left slowly rose to his feet, pulling the chain with him. Felisin winced as the shackle yanked at her when the man folded his arms across his bare, scarred chest. He glared at the approaching priest but said nothing.

'What does he want with me?' Felisin asked in a whisper. 'What have I done to earn a priest of Hood's attention?'

The squatting man rocked back on his heels, tilting his face into the late afternoon sun. 'Queen of Dreams, is this self-centred youth I hear from

those full, sweet lips? Or just the usual stance of noble blood around which the universe revolves? Answer me, I pray, fickle Queen!'

Felisin scowled. 'I felt better when I thought you asleep – or dead.'

'Dead men do not squat, lass, they sprawl. Hood's priest comes not for you but for me.'

She faced him then, the chain rattling between them. He looked more of a sunken-eyed toad than a man. He was bald, his face webbed in tattooing, minute, black, square-etched symbols hidden within an overall pattern covering skin like a wrinkled scroll. He was naked but for a ragged loincloth, its dye a faded red. Flies crawled all over him; reluctant to leave they danced on – but not, Felisin realized, to Hood's bleak orchestration. The tattooed pattern covered the man – the boar's face overlying his own, the intricate maze of script-threaded, curled fur winding down his arms, covering his exposed thighs and shins, and the detailed hooves etched into the skin of his feet. Felisin had until now been too self-absorbed, too numb with shock to pay any attention to her companions in the chain line: this man was a priest of Fener, the Boar of Summer, and the flies seemed to know it, understand it enough to alter their frenzied motion. She watched with morbid fascination as they gathered at the stumps at the ends of the man's wrists, the old scar tissue the only place on him unclaimed by Fener, but the paths the sprites took to those stumps touched not a single tattooed line. The flies danced a dance of avoidance – but for all that, they were eager to dance.

The priest of Fener had been ankle-shackled last in the line. Everyone else had the narrow iron bands fastened around their wrists. His feet were wet with blood and the flies hovered there but did not land. She saw his eyes flick open as the sun's light was suddenly blocked.

Hood's priest had arrived. Chain stirred as the man on Felisin's left drew back as far as the links allowed. The wall at her back felt hot, the tiles – painted with scenes of imperial pageantry – now slick through the thin weave of her slave tunic. Felisin stared at the fly-shrouded creature standing wordless before the squatting priest of Fener. She could see no exposed flesh, nothing of the man himself – the flies had claimed all of him and

beneath them he lived in darkness where even the sun's heat could not touch him. The cloud around him spread out now and Felisin shrank back as countless cold insect legs touched her legs, crawling swiftly up her thighs – she pulled her tunic's hem close around her, clamping her legs tight.

The priest of Fener spoke, his wide face split into a humourless grin. 'The Thirsting Hour's well past, Acolyte. Go back to your temple.'

Hood's servant made no reply but it seemed the buzzing changed pitch, until the music of the wings vibrated in Felisin's bones.

The priest's deep eyes narrowed and his tone shifted. 'Ah, well now. Indeed I was once a servant of Fener but no longer, not for years – Fener's touch cannot be scrubbed from my skin. Yet it seems that while the Boar of Summer has no love for me, he has even less for you.'

Felisin felt something shiver in her soul as the buzzing rapidly shifted, forming words that she could understand. 'Secret. . . *to show . . . now . . .*'

'Go on then,' the one-time servant of Fener growled, 'show me.'

Perhaps Fener acted then, the swatting hand of a furious god – Felisin would remember the moment and think on it often – or the secret was the mocking of immortals, a joke far beyond her understanding, but at that moment the rising tide of horror within her broke free, the numbness of her soul seared away as the flies exploded outward, dispersing in all directions to reveal ... no-one.

The former priest of Fener flinched as if struck, his eyes wide. From across the Round half a dozen guards cried out, wordless sounds punched from their throats. Chains snapped as others in the line jolted as if to flee. The iron loops set in the wall snatched taut, but the loops held as did the chains. The guards rushed forward and the line shrank back into submission.

'Now that,' the tattooed man shakily muttered, 'was uncalled for.'

An hour passed, an hour in which the mystery, shock and horror of Hood's priest sank down within Felisin to become but one more layer, the latest but not the last in what had become an unending nightmare. An acolyte of Hood ... who was not there. The buzzing of wings that formed words. *Was that Hood himself? Had the Lord of Death come to walk among mortals? And why stand before a once-priest of Fener – what was the message behind the revelation?*

But slowly the questions faded in her mind, the numbness seeping back, the return of cold despair. The Empress had culled the nobility, stripped the Houses and families of their wealth followed by a summary accusation and conviction of treason that had ended in chains. As for the ex-priest on her right and the huge, bestial man with all the makings of a common criminal on her left, clearly neither one could claim noble blood.

She laughed softly, startling both men.

'Has Hood's secret revealed itself to you, then, lass?' the ex-priest asked.

'No.'

'What do you find so amusing?'

She shook her head. I *had expected to find myself in good company, how's that for an upturned thought? There you have it, the very attitude the peasants hungered to tear down, the very same fuel the Empress has touched to flame—*

'Child!'

The voice was that of an aged woman, still haughty but with an air of desperate yearning. Felisin closed her eyes briefly, then straightened and looked along the line to the gaunt old woman beyond the thug. The woman was wearing her night-clothes, torn and smeared. *With noble blood, no less.*
'Lady Gaesen.'

The old woman reached out a shaking hand. 'Yes! Wife to Lord Hilrac! I am Lady Gaesen ...' The words came as if she'd forgotten who she was, and now she frowned through the cracked make-up covering her wrinkles and

her red-shot eyes fixed on Felisin. 'I know you,' she hissed. 'House of Paran. Youngest daughter. Felisin!'

Felisin went cold. She turned away and stared straight ahead, out into the compound where the guards stood leaning on pikes passing flasks of ale between them and waving away the last of the flies. A cart had arrived for the mule, four ash-smeared men clambering down from its bed with ropes and gaffs. Beyond the walls encircling the Round rose Unta's painted spires and domes. She longed for the shadowed streets between them, longed for the pampered life of a week ago, Sebry barking harsh commands at her as she led her favourite mare through her paces. And she would look up as she guided the mare in a delicate, precise turn, to see the row of green-leafed leadwoods separating the riding ground from the family vineyards.

Beside her the thug grunted. 'Hood's feet, the bitch has some sense of humour.'

Which bitch? Felisin wondered, but she managed to hold her expression even as she lost the comfort of her memories.

The ex-priest stirred. 'Sisterly spat, is it?' He paused, then dryly added, 'Seems a bit extreme.'

The thug grunted again and leaned forward, his shadow draping Felisin. 'Defrocked priest, are you? Not like the Empress to do any temples a favour.'

'She didn't. My loss of piety was long ago. I'm sure the Empress would rather I'd stayed in the cloister.'

'As if she'd care,' the thug said derisively as he settled back into his pose.

Lady Gaesen rattled, 'You must speak with *her*, Felisin! An appeal! I have rich friends—'

The thug's grunt turned into a bark. 'Farther up the line, hag, that's where you'll find your rich friends!'

Felisin just shook her head. Speak *with her, it's been months. Not even when Father died.*

A silence followed, dragging on, approaching the silence that had existed before this spate of babble, but then the ex-priest cleared his throat, spat and muttered, 'Not worth looking for salvation in a woman who's just following orders, Lady, never mind that one being this girl's sister—'

Felisin winced, then glared at the ex-priest. 'You presume—'

'He ain't presuming nothing,' growled the thug. 'Forget what's in the blood, what's supposed to be in it by your slant on things. This is the work of the Empress. Maybe you think it's personal, maybe you have to think that, being what you are ...'

'What I am?' Felisin laughed harshly. 'What House claims you as kin?'

The thug grinned. 'The House of Shame. What of it? Yours ain't looking any less shabby.'

'As I thought,' Felisin said, ignoring the truth of his last observation with difficulty. She glowered at the guards. 'What's happening? Why are we just sitting here?'

The ex-priest spat again. 'The Thirsting Hour's past. The mob outside needs organizing.' He glanced up at her from under the shelf of his brows. 'The peasants need to be roused. We're the first, girl, and the example's got to be established. What happens here in Unta is going to rattle every noble-born in the Empire.'

'Nonsense!' Lady Gaesen snapped. 'We shall be well treated. The Empress shall have to treat us well—'

The thug grunted a third time – what passed for laughter, Felisin realized – and said, 'If stupidity was a crime, lady, you would've been arrested years ago. The ogre's right. Not many of us are going to make it to the slave ships. This parade down Colonnade Avenue is going to be one long bloodbath. Mind you,' he added, eyes narrowing on the guards, 'old Baudin ain't going to be torn apart by any mob of peasants ...'

Felisin felt real fear stirring in her stomach. She fought off a shiver. 'Mind if I stay in your shadow, Baudin?'

The man looked down at her. 'You're a bit plump for my tastes.' He turned away, then added, 'But you do what you like.'

The ex-priest leaned close. 'Thinking on it, girl, this rivalry of yours ain't in the league of tattle-tails and scratch-fights. Likely your sister wants to be sure you—'

'She's Adjunct Tavore,' Felisin cut in. 'She's not my sister any more. She renounced our House at the call of the Empress.'

'Even so, I've an inkling it's still personal.'

Felisin scowled. 'How would you know anything about it?'

The man made a slight, ironic bow. 'Thief once, then priest, now historian. I well know the tense position the nobility finds itself in.'

Felisin's eyes slowly widened and she cursed herself for her stupidity. Even Baudin – who could not have helped overhearing – leaned forward for a searching stare. 'Heboric,' he said. 'Heboric Light Touch.'

Heboric raised his arms. 'As light as ever.'

'You wrote that revised history,' Felisin said. 'Committed treason—'

Heboric's wiry brows rose in mock alarm. 'Gods forbid! A philosophic divergence of opinions, nothing more! Duiker's own words at the trial – in my defence, Fener bless him.'

'But the Empress wasn't listening,' Baudin said, grinning. 'After all, you called her a murderer, and then had the gall to say she bungled the job!'

'Found an illicit copy, did you?'

Baudin blinked.

'In any case,' Heboric continued to Felisin, 'it's my guess your sister the Adjunct plans on your getting to the slave ships in one piece. Your brother disappearing on Genabackis took the life out of your father... so I've heard,' he added, grinning. 'But it was the rumours of treason that put spurs to your sister, wasn't it? Clearing the family name and all that—'

'You make it sound reasonable, Heboric,' Felisin said, hearing the bitterness in her voice but not caring any more. 'We differed in our opinions, Tavore and I, and now you see the result.'

'Your opinions of what, precisely?'

She did not reply.

There was a sudden stirring in the line. The guards straightened and swung to face the Round's West Gate. Felisin paled as she saw her sister – Adjunct Tavore now, heir to Lorn who'd died in Darujhistan – ride up on her stallion, a beast bred out of Paran stables, no less. Beside her was the ever-present T'amber, a beautiful young woman whose long, tawny mane gave substance to her name. Where she'd come from was anyone's guess, but she was now Tavore's personal aide. Behind these two rode a score of officers and a company of heavy cavalry, the soldiers looking exotic, foreign.

'Touch of irony,' Heboric muttered, eyeing the horsesoldiers.

Baudin jutted his head forward and spat. 'Red Swords, the bloodless bastards.'

The historian threw the man an amused glance. 'Travelled well in your profession, Baudin? Seen the sea walls of Aren, have you?'

The man shifted uneasily, then shrugged. 'Stood a deck or two in my time, ogre. Besides,' he added, 'the rumour of them's been in the city a week or more.'

There was a stirring from the Red Sword troop, and Felisin saw mailed hands close on weapon grips, peaked helms turning as one towards the Adjunct. *Sister Tavore, did our brother's disappearance cut you so deep? How great his footing you must imagine, to seek this recompense . . . and then, to make your loyalty absolute, you chose between me and Mother for the symbolic sacrifice. Didn't you realize that Hood stood on* the side *of both choices?* At least *Mother is with her beloved husband now . . .* She watched as Tavore scanned her guard briefly, then said something to T'amber, who edged her own mount towards the East Gate.

Baudin grunted one more time. 'Look lively. The endless hour's about to begin.'

It was one thing to accuse the Empress of murder, it was quite another to predict her next move. *If only they'd heeded my warning.* Heboric winced as they shuffled forward, the shackles cutting hard against his ankles.

People of civilized countenance made much of exposing the soft underbellies of their psyche – effete and sensitive were the brands of finer breeding. It was easy for them, safe, and that was the whole point, after all: a statement of coddled opulence that burned the throats of the poor more than any ostentatious show of wealth.

Heboric had said as much in his treatise, and could now admit a bitter admiration for the Empress and for Adjunct Tavore, Laseen's instrument in this. The excessive brutality of the midnight arrests – doors battered down, families dragged from their beds amidst wailing servants – provided the first layer of shock. Dazed by sleep deprivation, the nobles were trussed up and shackled, forced to stand before a drunken magistrate and a jury of beggars dragged in from the streets. It was a sour and obvious mockery of justice that stripped away the few remaining expectations of civil behaviour – stripped away civilization itself, leaving nothing but the chaos of savagery.

Shock layered on shock, a rending of those fine underbellies. Tavore knew her own kind, knew their weaknesses and was ruthless in exploiting them. What could drive a person to such viciousness?

The poor folk mobbed the streets when they heard the details, screaming adoration for their Empress. Carefully triggered riots, looting and slaughter followed, raging through the Noble District, hunting down those few selected highborns who hadn't been arrested – enough of them to whet the mob's bloodlust, give them faces to focus on with rage and hate. Then followed the reimposition of order, lest the city take flame.

The Empress made few mistakes. She'd used the opportunity to round up malcontents and unaligned academics, to close the fist of military presence on the capital, drumming the need for more troops, more recruits, more protection against the treasonous scheming of the noble class. The seized assets paid for this martial expansion. An exquisite move even if forewarned, rippling out with the force of Imperial Decree through the Empire, the cruel rage now sweeping through each city.

Bitter admiration. Heboric kept finding the need to spit, something he hadn't done since his cut-purse days in the Mouse Quarter of Malaz City. He could see the shock written on most of the faces in the chain line. Faces above nightclothes mostly, grimy and filthy from the pits, leaving their wearers bereft of even the social armour of regular clothing. Dishevelled hair, stunned expressions, broken poses – everything the mob beyond the Round lusted to see, hungered to flail—

Welcome to the streets, Heboric thought to himself as the guards prodded the line into motion, the Adjunct looking on, straight in her high saddle, her thin face drawn in until nothing but lines remained – the slit of her eyes, the brackets around her uncurved, almost lipless mouth – *damn, but she wasn't born with much, was she?* The looks went to her young sister, to the lass stumbling a step ahead of him.

Heboric's eyes fixed on Adjunct Tavore, curious, seeking something – a flicker of malicious pleasure, maybe – as her icy gaze swept the line and lingered for the briefest of moments on her sister. But the pause was all she revealed, a recognition acknowledged, nothing more. The gaze swept on.

The guards opened the East Gate two hundred paces ahead, near the front of the chained line. A roar poured through that ancient arched passageway, a wave of sound that buffeted soldier and prisoner alike, bouncing off the high walls and rising up amidst an explosion of terrified pigeons from the upper eaves. The sound of flapping wings drifted down like polite applause, although to Heboric it seemed that he alone appreciated that ironic touch of the gods. Not to be denied a gesture, he managed a slight bow.

Hood keep his damned secrets. Here, Fener you old sow, it's that itch I could never scratch. Look on, now, closely, see what becomes of your

wayward son.

Some part of Felisin's mind held on to sanity, held with a brutal grip in the face of a maelstrom. Soldiers lined Colonnade Avenue in ranks three deep, but again and again the mob seemed to find weak spots in that bristling line. She found herself observing, clinically, even as hands tore at her, fists pummelled her, blurred faces lunged at her with gobs of spit. And even as sanity held within her, so too a pair of steady arms encircled her – arms without hands, the ends scarred and suppurating, arms that pushed her forward, ever forward. No-one touched the priest. No-one dared. While ahead was Baudin – more horrifying than the mob itself.

He killed effortlessly. He tossed bodies aside with contempt, roaring, gesturing, beckoning. Even the soldiers stared beneath their ridged helmets, heads turning at his taunts, hands tightening on pike or sword hilt.

Baudin, laughing Baudin, his nose smashed by a well-flung brick, stones bouncing from him, his slave tunic in rags and soaked with blood and spit. Every body that darted within his reach he grasped, twisted, bent and broke. The only pause in his stride came when something happened ahead, some breach in the soldiery – or when Lady Gaesen faltered. He'd grasp her arms under the shoulders, none too gently, then propel her forward, swearing all the while.

A wave of fear swept ahead of him, a touch of the terror inflicted turning back on the mob. The number of attackers diminished, although the bricks flew in a constant barrage, some hitting, most missing.

The march through the city continued. Felisin's ears rang painfully. She heard everything through a daze of sound, but her eyes saw clearly, seeking and finding – all too often – images she would never forget.

The gates were in sight when the most savage breach occurred. The soldiers seemed to melt away, and the tide of fierce hunger swept into the street, engulfing the prisoners.

Felisin caught Heboric's grunting words close behind her as he shoved hard: 'This is the one, then.'

Baudin roared. Bodies crowded in, hands tearing, nails clawing. Felisin's last shreds of clothing were torn away. A hand closed on a fistful of her hair, yanked savagely, twisting her head around, seeking the crack of vertebrae. She heard screaming and realized it came from her own throat. A bestial snarl sounded behind her and she felt the hand clench spasmodically, then it was gone. More screaming filled her ears.

A strong momentum caught them, pulling or pushing – she couldn't tell – and Heboric's face came into view, spitting bloody skin from his mouth. All at once a space cleared around Baudin. He crouched, a torrent of dock curses bellowing from his mashed lips. His right ear had been torn off, taking with it hair, skin and flesh. The bone of his temple glistened wetly. Broken bodies lay around him, few moving. At his feet was Lady Gaesen. Baudin held her by the hair, pulling her face into view. The moment seemed to freeze, the world closing in to this single place.

Baudin bared his teeth and laughed. 'I'm no whimpering noble,' he growled, facing the crowd. 'What do want? You want the blood of a noblewoman?'

The mob screamed, reaching out eager hands. Baudin laughed again. 'We pass through, you hear me?' He straightened, dragging Lady Gaesen's head upward.

Felisin couldn't tell if the old woman was conscious. Her eyes were closed, the expression peaceful – almost youthful – beneath the smeared dirt and bruises. Perhaps she was dead. Felisin prayed that it was so. Something was about to happen, something to condense this nightmare into a single image. Tension held the air.

'She's yours!' Baudin screamed. With his other hand grasping the Lady's chin, he twisted her head around. The neck snapped and the body sagged, twitching. Baudin wrapped a length of chain around her neck. He pulled it taut, then began sawing. Blood showed, making the chain look like a mangled scarf.

Felisin stared in horror.

'Fener have mercy,' Heboric breathed.

The crowd was stunned silent, withdrawing even in their bloodlust, shrinking back. A soldier appeared, helmetless, his young face white, his eyes fixed on Baudin, his steps ceasing. Beyond him the glistening peaked helms and broad blades of the Red Swords flashed above the crowd as the horsemen slowly pushed their way towards the scene.

No movement save the sawing chain. No breath save Baudin's grunting snorts. Whatever riot continued to rage beyond this place, it seemed a thousand leagues away.

Felisin watched the woman's head jerk back and forth, a mockery of life's animation. She remembered Lady Gaesen, haughty, imperious, beyond her years of beauty and seeking stature in its stead. What other choice? Many, but it didn't matter now. Had she been a gentle, kindly grandmother, it would not have mattered, would not have changed the mind-numbing horror of this moment.

The head came away with a sobbing sound. Baudin's teeth glimmered as he stared at the crowd. 'We had a deal,' he grated. 'Here's what you want, something to remember this day by.' He flung Lady Gaesen's head into the mob, a whirl of hair and threads of blood. Screams answered its unseen landing.

More soldiers appeared – backed by the Red Swords – moving slowly, pushing at the still-silent onlookers. Peace was being restored, all along the line – in all places but this one violently, without quarter. As people began to die under sword strokes, the rest fled.

The prisoners who had filed out of the arena had numbered around three hundred. Felisin, looking up the line, had her first sight of what remained. Some shackles held only forearms, others were completely empty. Under a hundred prisoners remained on their feet. Many on the paving stones writhed, screaming in pain; the rest did not move at all.

Baudin glared at the nearest knot of soldiers. 'Likely timing, tin-heads.'

Heboric spat heavily, his face twisting as he glared at the thug. 'Imagined you'd buy your way out, did you, Baudin? Give them what they want. But it was wasted, wasn't it? The soldiers were coming. She could have lived—'

Baudin slowly turned, his face a sheet of blood. 'To what end, priest?'

'Was that your line of reasoning? She would've died in the hold anyway?'

Baudin showed his teeth and said slowly, 'I just hate making deals with bastards.'

Felisin stared at the three-foot length of chain between herself and Baudin. A thousand thoughts could have followed, link by link – what she had been, what she was now; the prison she'd discovered, inside and out, merged as vivid memory – but all she thought, all she said, was this: 'Don't make any more deals, Baudin.'

His eyes narrowed on her, her words and tone reaching him, somehow, some way.

Heboric straightened, a hard look in his eyes as he studied her. Felisin turned away, half in defiance, half in shame.

A moment later the soldiers – having cleared the line of the dead – pushed them along, out through the gate, onto the East Road towards the pier town called Luckless. Where Adjunct Tavore and her retinue waited, as did the slave ships of Aren.

Farmers and peasants lined the road, displaying nothing of the frenzy that had gripped their cousins in the city. Felisin saw in their faces a dull sorrow, a passion born of different scars. She could not understand where it came from, and she knew that her ignorance was the difference between her and them. She also knew, in her bruises, scratches and helpless nakedness, that her lessons had begun.

BOOK ONE



RARAKU

He swam at my feet,
Powerful arms in broad strokes
Sweeping the sand.
So I asked this man,
What seas do you swim?
And to this he answered,
'I have seen shells and the like
On this desert floor,
So I swim this land's memory
Thus honouring its past,'
Is the journey far, queried I.
'I cannot say,' he replied,
'For I shall drown long before
I am done.'

Sayings of the Fool
Thenys Bule

CHAPTER ONE

And all came to imprint
Their passage
On the path,
To scent the dry winds
Their cloying claim
To ascendancy

The Path of Hands
Messremb

1164th Year of Burn's Sleep
Tenth Year of the Rule of Empress Laseen
The Sixth in the Seven Years of Dryjhna, the Apocalyptic

A corkscrew plume of dust raced across the basin, heading deeper into the trackless desert of the Pan'potsun Odhan. Though less than two thousand paces away, it seemed a plume born of nothing.

From his perch on the mesa's wind-scarred edge, Mappo Runt followed it with relentless eyes the colour of sand, eyes set deep in a robustly boned, pallid face. He held a wedge of emrag cactus in his bristle-backed hand, unmindful of the envenomed spikes as he bit into it. Juices dribbled down his chin, staining it blue. He chewed slowly, thoughtfully.

Beside him Icarium flicked a pebble over the cliff edge. It clicked and clattered on its way down to the boulder-strewn base. Under the ragged Spiritwalker robe – its orange faded to dusty rust beneath the endless sun – his grey skin had darkened into olive green, as if his father's blood had answered this wasteland's ancient call. His long, braided black hair dripped black sweat onto the bleached rock.

Mappo pulled a mangled thorn from between his front teeth. 'Your dye's running,' he observed, eyeing the cactus blade a moment before taking another bite.

Icarium shrugged. 'Doesn't matter any more. Not out here.'

'My blind grandmother wouldn't have swallowed your disguise. There were narrow eyes on us in Ehrlitan. I felt them crawling on my back day and night. Tannos are mostly short and bow-legged, after all.' Mappo pulled his gaze away from the dust cloud and studied his friend. 'Next time,' he grunted, 'try belonging to a tribe where everyone's seven foot tall.'

Icarium's lined, weather-worn face twitched into something like a smile, just a hint, before resuming its placid expression. 'Those who would know of us in Seven Cities, surely know of us now. Those who would not might wonder at us, but that is all they will do.' Squinting against the glare, he nodded at the plume. 'What do you see, Mappo?'

'Rat head, long neck, black and hairy all over. If just that, I might be describing one of my uncles.'

'But there's more.'

'One leg up front and two in back.'

Icarium tapped the bridge of his nose, thinking. 'So, not one of your uncles. An aptorian?'

Mappo slowly nodded. 'The convergence is months away. I'd guess Shadowthrone caught a whiff of what's coming, sent out a few scouts ...'

'And this one?'

Mappo grinned, exposing massive canines. 'A tad too far afield. Sha'ik's pet now.' He finished off the cactus, wiped his spatulate hands, then rose from his crouch. Arching his back, he winced. There had been, unaccountably, a mass of roots beneath the sand under his bedroll the night just past, and now the muscles to either side of his spine matched every knot and twist of those treeless bones. He rubbed at his eyes. A quick scan down the length of his body displayed for him the tattered, dirt-crusted state

of his clothes. He sighed. 'It's said there's a waterhole out there, somewhere —'

'With Sha'ik's army camped around it.'

Mappo grunted.

Icarium also straightened, noting once again the sheer mass of his companion – big even for a Trell – the shoulders broad and maned in black hair, the sinewy muscles of his long arms, and the thousand years that capered like a gleeful goat behind Mappo's eyes. 'Can you track it?'

'If you like.'

Icarium grimaced. 'How long have we known each other, friend?'

Mappo's glance was sharp, then he shrugged. 'Long. Why do you ask?'

'I know reluctance when I hear it. The prospect disturbs you?'

'Any potential brush with demons disturbs me, Icarium. Shy as a hare is Mappo Trell.'

'I am driven by curiosity.'

'I know.'

The unlikely pair turned back to their small campsite, tucked between two towering spires of wind-sculpted rock. There was no hurry. Icarium sat down on a flat rock and proceeded to oil his longbow, striving to keep the hornwood from drying out. Once satisfied with the weapon's condition, he turned to his single-edged long sword, sliding the ancient weapon from its bronze-banded boiled-leather scabbard, then setting an oiled whetstone to its notched edge.

Mappo struck the hide tent, folding it haphazardly before stuffing it into his large leather bag. Cooking utensils followed, as did the bedding. He tied the drawstrings and hefted the bag over one shoulder, then glanced to where Icarium waited – bow rewrapped and slung across his back.

Icarium nodded, and the two of them, half-blood Jaghut and full-blooded Trell, began on the path leading down into the basin.

Overhead the stars hung radiant, casting enough light down onto the basin to tinge its cracked pan silver. The bloodflies had passed with the vanishing of the day's heat, leaving the night to the occasional swarm of capemoths and the batlike rhizan lizards that fed on them.

Mappo and Icarium paused for a rest in the courtyard of some ruins. The mudbrick walls had all but eroded away, leaving nothing but shin-high ridges laid out in a geometric pattern around an old, dried-up well. The sand covering the courtyard's tiles was fine and windblown and seemed to glow faintly to Mappo's eyes. Twisted brush clung with fisted roots along its edges.

The Pan'potsun Odhan and the Holy Desert Raraku that flanked it to the west were both home to countless such remnants from long-dead civilizations. In their travels Mappo and Icarium had found high tels – flat-topped hills built up of layer upon layer of city – situated in a rough procession over a distance of fifty leagues between the hills and the desert, clear evidence that a rich and thriving people had once lived in what was now dry, wind-blasted wasteland. From the Holy Desert had emerged the legend of Dryjhna the Apocalyptic. Mappo wondered if the calamity that had befallen the city-dwellers in this region had in some way contributed to the myth of a time of devastation and death. Apart from the occasional abandoned estate such as the one they now rested in, many ruins showed signs of a violent end.

His thoughts finding familiar ruts, Mappo grimaced. *Not all pasts can be laid at our feet, and we are no closer here and now than we've ever been. Nor have I any reason to disbelieve my own words.* He turned away from those thoughts as well.

Near the courtyard's centre stood a single column of pink marble, pitted and grooved on one side where the winds born out in Raraku blew unceasingly towards the Pan'potsun Hills. The pillar's opposite side still retained the spiral patterning carved there by long-dead artisans.

Upon entering the courtyard Icarium had walked directly to the six-foot-high column, examining its sides. His grunt told Mappo he'd found what he had been looking for.

'And this one?' the Trell asked, setting his leather sack down.

Icarium came over, wiping dust from his hands. 'Down near the base, a scattering of tiny clawed hands – the seekers are on the Trail.'

'Rats? More than one set?'

'D'ivers,' Icarium agreed, nodding.

'Now who might that be, I wonder?'

'Probably Gryllen.'

'Mhm, unpleasant.'

Icarium studied the flat plain stretching into the west. 'There will be others. Soletaken and D'ivers both. Those who feel near to Ascendancy, and those who are not, yet seek the Path nonetheless.'

Mappo sighed, studying his old friend. Faint dread stirred within him. *D'ivers and Soletaken, the twin curses of shapeshifting, the fever for which there is no cure. Gathering. . .here, in this place.* 'Is this wise, Icarium?' he asked softly. 'In seeking your eternal goal, we find ourselves walking into a most disagreeable convergence. Should the gates open, we shall find our passage contested by a host of blood-thirsty individuals all eager in their belief that the gates offer Ascendancy.'

'If such a pathway exists,' Icarium said, his eyes still on the horizon, 'then perhaps I shall find my answers there as well.'

Answers are no benediction, friend. Trust me in this. Please. 'You have still not explained to me what you will do once you have found them.'

Icarium turned to him with a faint smile. 'I am my own curse, Mappo. I have lived centuries, yet what do I know of my own past? Where are my memories? How can I judge my own life without such knowledge?'

'Some would consider your curse a gift,' Mappo said, a flicker of sadness passing across his features.

'I do not. I view this convergence as an opportunity. It might well provide me with answers. To achieve them, I hope to avoid drawing my weapons, but I shall if I must.'

The Trell sighed a second time and rose from his crouch. 'You may be tested in that resolve soon, friend.' He faced southwest. 'There are six desert wolves on our trail.'

Icarium unwrapped his antlered bow and strung it in a swift, fluid motion. 'Desert wolves never hunt people.'

'No,' Mappo agreed. It was another hour before the moon would rise. He watched Icarium lay out six long, stone-tipped arrows, then squinted out into the darkness. Cold fear crept along the nape of his neck. The wolves were not yet visible, but he felt them all the same. 'They are six, but they are one. D'ivers.' *Better it would have been a Soletaken. Veering into a single beast is unpleasant enough, but into many . . .*

Icarium frowned. 'One of power, then, to achieve the shape of six wolves. Do you know who it might be?'

'I have a suspicion,' Mappo said quietly.

They fell silent, waiting.

Half a dozen tawny shapes appeared out of a gloom that seemed of its own making, less than thirty strides away. At twenty paces the wolves spread out into an open half-circle facing Mappo and Icarium. The spicy scent of D'ivers filled the still night air. One of the lithe beasts edged forward, then stopped as Icarium raised his bow.

'Not six,' Icarium muttered, 'but one.'

'I know him,' Mappo said. 'A shame he can't say the same of us. He is uncertain, but he's taken a blood-spilling form. Tonight, Ryllandaras hunts in the desert. Does he hunt us or something else, I wonder?'

Icarium shrugged. 'Who shall speak first, Mappo?'

'Me,' the Trell replied, taking a step forward. This would require guile and cunning. A mistake would prove deadly. He pitched his voice low and wry. 'Long way from home, aren't we. Your brother Treach had it in mind that he killed you. Where was that chasm? Dal Hon? Or was it Li Heng? You were D'ivers jackals then, I seem to recall.'

Ryllandaras spoke inside their minds, a voice cracking and halting with disuse. I *am tempted to match wits with you, N'Trell, before killing you.*

'Might not be worth it,' Mappo replied easily. 'With the company I've been keeping, I'm as out of practice as you, Ryllandaras.'

The lead wolf's bright blue eyes flicked to Icarium.

'I have little wits to match,' the Jaghut half-blood said softly, his voice barely carrying. 'And I am losing patience.'

Foolish. Charm is all that can save you. Tell me, bowman, do you surrender your life to your companion's wiles?

Icarium shook his head. 'Of course not. I share his opinion of himself.'

Ryllandaras seemed confused. A *matter of expedience then, the two of you travelling together. Companions* without trust, *without confidence in each other. The stakes must be high.*

'I am getting bored, Mappo,' Icarium said.

The six wolves stiffened as one, half flinching. *Mappo Runt and Icarium. Ah, we see. Know that we've no quarrel with you.*

'Wits matched,' Mappo said, his grin broadening a moment before disappearing entirely. 'Hunt elsewhere, Ryllandaras, before Icarium does Treach a favour.' *Before you unleash all that I am sworn to prevent.* 'Am I understood?'

Our trail . . . converges, the D'ivers said, upon *the spoor of a demon of Shadow.*

'Not Shadow any longer,' Mappo replied. 'Sha'ik's. The Holy Desert no longer sleeps.'

So it seems. Do you forbid us our hunt?

Mappo glanced at Icarium, who lowered his bow and shrugged. 'If you wish to lock jaws with an aptorian, that is your choice. Our interest was only passing.'

Then indeed shall our jaws close upon the throat of the demon.

'You would make Sha'ik your enemy?' Mappo asked.

The lead wolf cocked its head. *The name means nothing to me.*

The two travellers watched as the wolves padded off, vanishing once again into a gloom of sorcery. Mappo showed his teeth, then sighed, and Icarium nodded, giving voice to their shared thought. 'It will, soon.'

The Wickan horsesoldiers loosed fierce cries of exultation as they led their broad-backed horses down the transport's gangplanks. The scene at the quayside of Hissar's Imperial Harbour was chaotic, a mass of unruly tribesmen and women, the flash of iron-headed lances rippling over black braided hair and spiked skullcaps. From his position on the harbour-entrance tower parapet, Duiker looked down on the wild outland company with more than a little scepticism, and with growing trepidation.

Beside the Imperial Historian stood the High Fist's representative, Mallick Rel, his fat, soft hands folded together and resting on his paunch, his skin the colour of oiled leather and smelling of Aren perfumes. Mallick Rel looked nothing like the chief adviser to the Seven Cities' commander of the Malazan armies. A Jhistal priest of the Elder god of the seas, Mael, his presence here to officially convey the High Fist's welcome to the new Fist of the 7th Army was precisely what it appeared to be: a calculated insult. Although, Duiker amended silently, the man at his side had, in a very short time, risen to a position of power among the Imperial players on this continent. A thousand rumours rode the tongues of the soldiers about the smooth, soft-spoken priest and whatever weapon he held over High Fist Pormqual – each and every rumour no louder than a whisper, for Mallick

Rel's path to Pormqual's side was a tale of mysterious misfortune befalling everyone who stood in his way, and fatal misfortune at that.

The political mire among the Malazan occupiers in Seven Cities was as obscure as it was potentially deadly. Duiker suspected that the new Fist would understand little of veiled gestures of contempt, lacking as he did the more civilized nuances of the Empire's tamed citizens. The question that remained for the historian, then, was how long Coltaine of the Crow Clan would survive his new appointment.

Mallick Rel pursed his full lips and slowly exhaled. 'Historian,' he said softly, his Gedorian Falari accent faint in its sibilant roll. 'Pleased by your presence. Curious as well. Long from Aren court, now ...' He smiled, not showing his greendyed teeth. 'Caution bred of distant culling?'

Words like the lap of waves, the god Mael's formless affectation and insidious patience. This, my fourth conversation with Rel. Oh, how I dislike this creature! Duiker cleared his throat. 'The Empress takes little heed of me, Jhistal...'

Mallick Rel's soft laugh was like the rattle of a snake's tail. 'Unheeded historian or unheeding of history? Hint of bitterness at advice rejected or worse, ignored. Be calmed, no crimes winging back from Unta's towers.'

'Pleased to hear it,' Duiker muttered, wondering at the priest's source. 'I remain in Hissar as a matter of research,' he explained after a moment. 'The precedent of shipping prisoners to the Otataral mines on the island reaches back to the Emperor's time, although he generally reserved that fate for mages.'

'Mages? Ah, ah.'

Duiker nodded. 'Effective, yes, although unpredictable. The specific properties of Otataral as a magic-deadening ore remain largely mysterious. Even so, madness claimed most of those sorcerers, although it is not known if that was the result of exposure to the ore dust, or the deprivation from their Warrens.'

'Some mages among the next slave shipment?'

'Some.'

'Question soon answered, then.'

'Soon,' Duiker agreed.

The T-shaped quay was now a maelstrom of belligerent Wickans, frightened dock porters and short-tempered warhorses. A cordon of Hissar Guard provided the stopper to the bottleneck at the dock's end where it opened out onto the cobbled half-round. Of Seven Cities blood, the Guards had hitched their round shields and unsheathed their tulwars, waving the broad, curving blades threateningly at the Wickans, who answered with barking challenges.

Two men arrived on the parapet. Duiker nodded greetings. Mallick Rel did not deign to acknowledge either of them – a rough captain and the 7th's lone surviving cadre mage, both men clearly ranked too low for any worthwhile cultivation by the priest.

'Well, Kulp,' Duiker said to the squat, white-haired wizard, 'your arrival may prove timely.'

Kulp's narrow, sunburned face twisted into a sour scowl. 'Came up here to keep my bones and flesh intact, Duiker. I'm not interested in becoming Coltaine's lumpy carpet in his step up to the post. They're *his* people, after all. That he hasn't done a damned thing to quell this brewing riot doesn't bode well, I'd say.'

The captain at his side grunted agreement. 'Sticks in the throat,' he growled. 'Half the officers here saw their first blood facing that bastard Coltaine, and now here he is, about to take command. Hood's knuckles,' he spat, 'won't be any tears spilled if the Hissar Guard cuts down Coltaine and every one of his Wickan savages right here at the Quay. The Seventh don't need them.'

'Truth,' Mallick Rel said to Duiker with veiled eyes, 'behind the threat of uprisings. Continent here a viper nest. Coltaine an odd choice—'

'Not so odd,' Duiker said, shrugging. He returned his attention to the scene below. The Wickans closest to the Hissar Guard had begun strutting back

and forth in front of the armoured line. The situation was but moments away from a full-scale battle – the bottleneck was about to become a killing ground. The historian felt something cold clutch his stomach at seeing horn bows now strung among the Wickan soldiers. Another company of guards appeared from the avenue to the right of the main colonnade, bristling with pikes.

'Can you explain that?' Kulp asked.

Duiker turned and was surprised to see all three men staring at him. He thought back to his last comment, then shrugged again. 'Coltaine united the Wickan clans in an uprising against the Empire. The Emperor had a hard time bringing him to heel – as some of you know first-hand. True to the Emperor's style, he acquired Coltaine's loyalty—'

'How?' Kulp barked.

'No one knows.' Duiker smiled. 'The Emperor rarely explained his successes. In any case, since Empress Laseen held no affection for her predecessor's chosen commanders, Coltaine was left to rot in some backwater on Quon Tali. Then the situation changed. Adjunct Lorn is killed in Darujhistan, High Fist Dujek and his army turn renegade, effectively surrendering the entire Genabackan Campaign, and the Year of Dryjhna approaches here in Seven Cities, prophesied as the year of rebellion. Laseen needs able commanders before it all slips from her grasp. The new Adjunct Tavore is untested. So.. .'

'Coltaine,' the captain nodded, his scowl deepening. 'Sent here to take command of the Seventh and put down the rebellion—'

'After all,' Duiker said dryly, 'who better to deal with insurrection than a warrior who led one himself?'

'If mutiny occurs, scant his chances,' Mallick Rel said, his eyes on the scene below.

Duiker saw half a dozen tulwars flash, watched the Wickans recoil and then unsheathe their own long-knives. They seemed to have found a leader, a tall, fierce-looking warrior with fetishes in his long braids, who now

bellowed encouragement, waving his own weapon over his head. 'Hood!' the historian swore. 'Where on earth is Coltaine?'

The captain laughed. 'The tall one with the lone long-knife.'

Duiker's eyes widened. *That madman is Coltaine? The* Seventh's *new Fist?*

'Ain't changed at all, I see,' the captain continued. 'If you're going to keep your head as leader of all the clans, you'd better be nastier than all the rest put together. Why'd you think the old Emperor liked him so much?'

'Beru fend,' Duiker whispered, appalled.

In the next breath an ululating scream from Coltaine brought sudden silence from the Wickan company. Weapons slid back into their sheaths, bows were lowered, arrows returned to their quivers. Even the bucking, snapping horses fell still, heads raised and ears pricked. A space cleared around Coltaine, who had turned his back on the guards. The tall warrior gestured and the four men on the parapet watched in silence as with absolute precision every horse was saddled. Less than a minute later the horsesoldiers were mounted, guiding their horses into a close parade formation that would rival the Imperial elites.

'That,' Duiker said, 'was superbly done.'

A soft sigh escaped Mallick Rel. 'Savage timing, a beast's sense of challenge, then contempt. Statement for the guards. For us as well?'

'Coltaine's a snake,' the captain said, 'if that's what you're asking. If the High Command at Aren thinks they can dance around him, they're in for a nasty surprise.'

'Generous advice,' Rel acknowledged.

The captain looked as if he'd just swallowed something sharp, and Duiker realized that the man had spoken without thought as to the priest's place in the High Command.

Kulp cleared his throat. 'He's got them in troop formation – guess the ride to the barracks will be peaceful after all.'

'I admit,' Duiker said wryly, 'that I look forward to meeting the Seventh's new Fist.'

His heavy-lidded eyes on the scene below, Rel nodded. 'Agreed.'

Leaving behind the Skara Isles on a heading due south, the fisherboat set out into the Kansu Sea, its triangular sail creaking and straining. If the gale held, they would reach the Ehrlitan coast in four hours. Fiddler's scowl deepened. *The Ehrlitan coast, Seven Cities. I hate this damned continent. Hated it the first time, hate it even more now.* He leaned over the gunnel and spat acrid bile into the warm, green waves.

'Feeling any better?' Crokus asked from the prow, his tanned young face creased with genuine concern.

The old saboteur wanted to punch that face; instead he just growled and hunched down deeper against the barque's hull.

Kalam's laugh rumbled from where he sat at the tiller. 'Fiddler and water don't mix, lad. Look at him, he's greener than that damned winged monkey of yours.'

A sympathetic snuffling sound breathed against Fiddler's cheek. He pried open one bloodshot eye to find a tiny, wizened face staring at him. 'Go away, Moby,' Fiddler croaked. The familiar, once servant to Crokus's uncle Mammot, seemed to have adopted the sapper, the way stray dogs and cats often did. Kalam would say it was the other way around, of course. 'A lie,' Fiddler whispered. 'Kalam's good at those—' *like lounging around in Rutu Jelba for a whole damn week on the off-chance that a Skrae trader would come in. 'Book passage in comfort, eh, Fid?' Not like the damned ocean crossing, oh no – and that one was supposed to have been in comfort, too. A whole week in Rutu Jelba, a lizard' infested, orange-bricked cesspool of a city, then what? Eight jakatas for this rag-stoppered sawed-in-half ale casket.*

The steady rise and fall lulled Fiddler as the hours passed. His mind drifted back to the appallingly long journey that had brought them thus far,

then to the appallingly long journey that lay ahead. *We never do things the easy way, do we?*

He would rather that every sea dried up. Men got *feet, not flippers. Even so, we're about to cross overland – over a fly- infested, waterless waste, where people smile only to announce they're about to kill you.*

The day dragged on, green-tinged and shaky.

He thought back to the companions he'd left behind on Genabackis, wishing he could be marching alongside them. Into *a religious war. Don't forget that, Fid. Religious wars are no fun.* The faculty of reasoning that permitted surrender did not apply in such instances. Still, the squad was all he'd known for years. He felt bereft out of its shadows. Just *Kalam for old company, and he calk that land ahead home. And he smiles before he kills. And what's he and Quick Ben got planned they ain't told me about yet?*

'There's more of those flying fish,' Apsalar said, her voice identifying the soft hand that had found its way to his shoulder. 'Hundreds of them!'

'Something big from the deep is chasing them,' Kalam said.

Groaning, Fiddler pushed himself upright. Moby took the opportunity to reveal its motivation behind the day's cooing and crawled into the sapper's lap, curling up and closing its yellow eyes. Fiddler gripped the gunnel and joined his three companions in studying the school of flying fish a hundred yards off the starboard side. The length of a man's arm, the milky white fish were clearing the waves, sailing thirty feet or so, then slipping back under the surface. In the Kansu Sea flying fish hunted like sharks, the schools capable of shredding a bull whale down to bones in minutes. They used their ability to fly to launch themselves onto the back of a whale when it broke for air. 'What in Mael's name is hunting them?'

Kalam was frowning. 'Shouldn't be anything here in the Kansu. Out in Seeker's Deep there's dhenrabi, of course.'

'Dhenrabi! Oh, that comforts me, Kalam. Oh yes indeed!'

'Some kind of sea serpent?' Crokus asked.

'Think of a centipede eighty paces long,' Fiddler answered. 'Wraps up whales and ships alike, blows out all the air under its armoured skin and sinks like a stone, taking its prey with it.'

'They're rare,' Kalam said, 'and never seen in shallow water.'

'Until now,' Crokus said, his voice rising in alarm.

The dhenrabi broke the surface in the midst of the flying fish, thrashing its head side to side, a wide razorlike mouth flensing prey by the score. The width of the creature's head was immense, as many as ten arm-spans. Its segmented armour was deep green under the encrusted barnacles, each segment revealing long chitinous limbs.

'Eighty paces long?' Fiddler hissed. 'Not unless it's been cut in half!'

Kalam rose at the tiller. 'Ready with the sail, Crokus. We're going to run. Westerly.'

Fiddler pushed a squawking Moby from his lap and opened his backpack, fumbling to unwrap his crossbow. 'If it decides we look tasty, Kalam ...'

'I know,' the assassin rumbled.

Quickly assembling the huge iron weapon, Fiddler glanced up and met Apsalar's wide eyes. Her face was white. The sapper winked. 'Got a surprise if it comes for us, girl.'

She nodded. 'I remember...'

The dhenrabi had seen them. Veering from the school of flying fish, it was now cutting sinuously through the waves towards them.

'That's no ordinary beast,' Kalam muttered. 'You smelling what I'm smelling, Fiddler?'

Spicy, bitter. 'Hood's breath, that's a Soletaken!'

'A what?' Crokus asked.

'Shapeshifter,' Kalam said.

A rasping voice filled Fiddler's mind – and the expressions on his companions' faces told him they heard as well – *Mortals, unfortunate for you to witness my passage.*

The sapper grunted. The creature did not sound at all regretful.

It continued, *For this you must all die, though I shall not dishonour your flesh by eating you.*

'Kind of you,' Fiddler muttered, setting a solid quarrel in the crossbow's slot. The iron head had been replaced with a grapefruit-sized clay ball.

Another fisherboat mysteriously lost, the Soletaken mused ironically. Alas.

Fiddler scrambled to the stern, crouching down beside Kalam. The assassin straightened to face the dhenrabi, one hand on the tiller. 'Soletaken! Be on your way – we care nothing for your passage!'

I shall be merciful when killing you. The creature rushed the barque from directly astern, cutting through the water like a sharp-hulled ship. Its jaws opened wide.

'You were warned,' Fiddler said as he raised the crossbow, aimed and fired. The quarrel sped for the beast's open mouth. Lightning fast, the dhenrabi snapped at the shaft, its thin, sawedged teeth slicing through the quarrel and shattering the clay ball, releasing to the air the powdery mixture within the ball. The contact resulted in an instantaneous explosion that blew the Soletaken's head apart.

Fragments of skull and grey flesh raked the water on all sides. The incendiary powder continued to burn fiercely all it clung to, sending up hissing steam. Momentum carried the headless body to within four spans of the barque's stern before it dipped down and slid smoothly out of sight even as the last echoes of the detonation faded. Smoke drifted sideways over the waves.

'You picked the wrong fishermen,' Fiddler said, lowering his weapon.

Kalam settled back at the tiller, returning the craft to a southerly course. A strange stillness hung in the air. Fiddler disassembled his crossbow and repacked it in oilcloth. As he resumed his seat amidships, Moby crawled back into his lap. Sighing, he scratched it behind an ear. 'Well, Kalam?'

'I'm not sure,' the assassin admitted. 'What brought a Soletaken into the Kansu Sea? Why did it want its passage secret?'

'If Quick Ben was here ...'

'But he isn't, Fid. It's a mystery we'll have to live with, and hopefully we won't run into any more.'

'Do you think it's related to ... ?'

Kalam scowled. 'No.'

'Related to what?' Crokus demanded. 'What are you two going on about?'

'Just musing,' Fiddler said. 'The Soletaken was heading south. Like us.'

'So?'

Fiddler shrugged. 'So ... nothing. Just that.' He spat again over the side and slumped down. 'The excitement made me forget my seasickness. Now the excitement's faded, dammit.'

Everyone fell silent, though the frown on the face of Crokus told the sapper that the boy wasn't about to let the issue rest for long.

The gale remained steady, pushing them hard southward. Less than three hours after that Apsalar announced that she could see land ahead, and forty minutes later Kalam directed the craft parallel to the Ehrlitan coastline half a league offshore. They tacked west, following the cedar-lined ridge as the day slowly died.

'I think I see horsemen,' Apsalar said.

Fiddler raised his head, joining the others in studying the line of riders following a coastal track along the ridge.

'I make them six in all,' Kalam said. 'Second rider's—'

'Got an Imperial pennon,' Fiddler finished, his face twisting at the taste in his mouth. 'Messenger and Lancer guard—'

'Heading for Ehrlitan,' Kalam added.

Fiddler turned in his seat and met his corporal's dark eyes. *Trouble?*

Maybe.

The exchange was silent, a product of years fighting side by side.

Crokus asked, 'Something wrong? Kalam? Fiddler?'

The boy's sharp. 'Hard to say,' Fiddler muttered. 'They've seen us but what have they seen? Four fisherfolk in a barque, some Skrae family headed into the port for a taste of civilization.'

'There's a village just south of the tree-line,' Kalam said. 'Keep an eye out for a creek mouth, Crokus, and a beach with no driftwood – the houses will be tucked leeward of the ridge, meaning inland. How's my memory, Fid?'

'Good enough for a native, which is what you are. How long out of the city?'

'Ten hours on foot.'

'That close?'

'That close.'

Fiddler fell silent. The Imperial messenger and his horse guard had moved out of sight, leaving the ridge as they swung south towards Ehrlitan. The plan had been to sail right into the Holy City's ancient, crowded harbour, arriving anonymously. It was likely that the messenger was delivering information that had nothing to do with them – they'd given nothing away since reaching the Imperial port of Karakarang from Genabackis, arriving on a Moranth Blue trader having paid passage as crew. The overland journey from Karakarang across the Talgai Mountains and down to Rutu Jelba had been on the Tano pilgrim route – a common enough journey. And the week in Rutu Jelba had been spent inconspicuously lying low, with only

Kalam making nightly excursions to the wharf district, seeking passage across the Otataral Sea to the mainland.

At worst, a report might have reached someone official, somewhere, that two possible deserters, accompanied by a Genabackan and a woman, had arrived on Malazan territory – hardly news to shake the Imperial wasp nest all the way to Ehrlitan. So, likely Kalam was being his usual paranoid self.

'I see the stream mouth,' Crokus said, pointing to a place on the shore.

Fiddler glanced back at Kalam. *Hostile land, how low do we crawl?*

Looking up at grasshoppers, Fid.

Hood's *breath.* He looked back to the shore. 'I hate Seven Cities,' he whispered. In his lap, Moby yawned, revealing a mouth bristling with needlelike fangs. Fiddler blanched. 'Cuddle up whenever you want, pup,' he said, shivering.

Kalam angled the tiller. Crokus worked the sail, deft enough after a two-month voyage across Seeker's Deep to let the barque slip easily into the wind, the tattered sail barely raising a luff. Apsalar shifted on the seat, stretched her arms and flashed Fiddler a smile. The sapper scowled and looked away. Bum *shake me, I've got to keep my jaw from dropping every time she does that. She was another woman, once. A killer, the knife of a god. She did things . . . Besides, she's with Crokus, ain't she. The boy's got all the luck and the whores in Karakarang looked like poxed sisters from some gigantic poxed family and all those poxed babies on their hips* ... He shook himself. *Oh, Fiddler, too long at sea, way too long!*

'I don't see any boats,' Crokus said.

'Up the creek,' Fiddler mumbled, dragging a nail through his beard in pursuit of a nit. After a moment he plucked it out and flicked it over the side. Ten *hours on foot, then Ehrlitan, and a bath and a shave and a Kansuan girl with a saw-comb and the whole night free afterward.*

Crokus nudged him. 'Getting excited, Fiddler?'

'You don't know the half of it.'

'You were here during the conquest, weren't you? Back when Kalam was fighting for the other side – for the Seven Holy Falah'dan – and the T'lan Imass marched for the Emperor and—'

'Enough,' Fiddler waved a hand. 'I don't need reminding, and neither does Kalam. All wars are ugly, but that one was uglier than most.'

'Is it true that you were in the company that chased Quick Ben across the Holy Desert Raraku, and that Kalam was your guide, only he and Quick were planning on betraying you all, but Whiskeyjack had already worked that out—'

Fiddler turned a glare on Kalam. 'One night in Rutu Jelba with a jug of Falari rum, and this boy knows more than any Imperial historian still breathing.' He swung back to Crokus. 'Listen, son, best you forget everything that drunken lout told you that night. The past is already hunting our tails – no point in making it any easier.'

Crokus ran a hand through his long black hair. 'Well,' he said softly, 'if Seven Cities is so dangerous, why didn't we just head straight down to Quon Tali, to where Apsalar lived, so we can find her father? Why all this sneaking around – and on the wrong continent at that?'

'It's not that simple,' Kalam growled.

'Why? I thought that was the reason for this whole journey.' Crokus reached for Apsalar's hand and clasped it in both of his, but saved his hard expression for Kalam and Fiddler. 'You both said you owed it to her. It wasn't right and you wanted to put it right. But now I'm thinking it's only part of the reason, I'm thinking that you two have something else planned – that taking Apsalar back home was just an excuse to come back to your Empire, even though you're officially outlawed. And whatever it is you're planning, it's meant coming here, to Seven Cities, and it's also meant we have to sneak around, terrified of everything, jumping at shadows, as if the whole Malazan army was after us.' He paused, drew a deep breath, then continued. 'We have a right to know the truth, because you're putting us in danger and we don't even know what kind, or why, or anything. So out with it. Now.'

Fiddler leaned back on the gunnel. He looked over at Kalam and raised an eyebrow. 'Well, Corporal? It's your call.'

'Give me a list, Fiddler,' Kalam said.

'The Empress wants Darujhistan,' The sapper met Crokus's steady gaze. 'Agreed?'

The boy hesitated, then nodded.

Fiddler continued. 'What she wants she usually gets sooner or later. Call it precedent. Now, she's tried to take your city once, right, Crokus? And it cost her Adjunct Lorn, two Imperial demons, and High Fist Dujek's loyalty, not to mention the loss of the Bridgeburners. Enough to make anyone sting.'

'Fine. But what's that got to do—'

'Don't interrupt. Corporal said make a list. I'm making it. You've followed me so far? Good. Darujhistan eluded her once – but she'll make certain next time. Assuming there is a next time.'

'Well,' Crokus was scowling, 'why wouldn't there be? You said she gets what she wants.'

'And you're loyal to your city, Crokus?'

'Of course—'

'So you'd do anything you could to prevent the Empress from conquering it?'

'Well, yes but—'

'Sir?' Fiddler turned back to Kalam.

The burly black-skinned man looked out over the waves, sighed, then nodded to himself. He faced Crokus. 'It's this, lad. Time's come. I'm going after her.'

The Daru boy's expression was blank, but Fiddler saw Apsalar's eyes widen, her face losing its colour. She sat back suddenly, then half-smiled – and Fiddler went cold upon seeing it.

'I don't know what you mean,' Crokus said. 'After who? The Empress? How?'

'He means,' Apsalar said, still smiling a smile that had belonged to her once, long ago, when she'd been ... *someone else*, 'that he's going to try and kill her.'

'What?' Crokus stood, almost pitching himself over the side. 'You? You and a seasick sapper with a broken fiddle strapped to his back? Do you think we're going to help you in this insane, suicidal—'

'I remember,' Apsalar said suddenly, her eyes narrowing on Kalam.

Crokus turned to her. 'Remember what?'

'Kalam. He was a Falah'dan's Dagger, and the Claw gave him command of a Hand. Kalam's a master assassin, Crokus. And Quick Ben—'

'Is three thousand leagues away!' Crokus shouted. 'He's a squad mage, for Hood's sake! That's it, a squalid little squad mage!'

'Not quite,' Fiddler said. 'And being so far away doesn't mean a thing, son. Quick Ben's our shaved knuckle in the hole.'

'Your what in the where?'

'Shaved knuckle, as in the game of knuckles – a good gambler's usually using a shaved knuckle, as in cheating in the casts, if you know what I mean. As for "hole", that'd be Quick Ben's Warren – the one that can put him at Kalam's side in the space of a heartbeat, no matter how far away he happens to be. So, Crokus, there you have it: Kalam's going to give it a try, but it's going to take some planning, preparation. And that starts here, in Seven Cities. You want Darujhistan free for ever more? The Empress Laseen must die.'

Crokus slowly sat back down. 'But why Seven Cities? Isn't the Empress in Quon Tali?'

'Because,' Kalam said as he angled the fisherboat into the creek mouth and the oppressive heat of the land rose around them, 'because, lad, Seven Cities is about to rise.'

'What do you mean?'

The assassin bared his teeth. 'Rebellion.'

Fiddler swung around and scanned the fetid undergrowth lining the banks. *And that,* he said to himself with a chill clutching his stomach, *is the part of this plan* that I *hate the most. Chasing one of Quick Ben's wild ideas with the whole countryside going up in flames.*

A minute later they rounded a bend and the village appeared, a scattering of wattle-and-daub huts in a broken half-circle facing a line of skiffs pulled onto a sandy beach. Kalam nudged the tiller and the fisherboat drifted towards the strand. As the keel scraped bottom, Fiddler clambered over the gunnel and stepped onto dry land, Moby now awake and clinging with all fours to the front of his tunic. Ignoring the squawking creature, Fiddler slowly straightened. 'Well,' he sighed as the first of the village's mongrel dogs announced their arrival, 'it's begun.'

CHAPTER TWO

> To this day it remains easy to ignore the fact that the Aren High Command was rife with treachery, dissension, rivalry and malice ... The assertion that [the Aren High Command] was ignorant of the undercurrents in the countryside is, at best naive, at worst cynical in the extreme .. .
>
> *The Sha'ik Rebellion*
> Cullaran

The red ochre handprint on the wall was dissolving in the rain, trickling roots down along the mortar between the fired mudbricks. Hunched against the unseasonal downpour, Duiker watched as the print slowly disappeared, wishing that the day had broken dry, that he could have come upon the sign before the rain obscured it, that he could then have gained a sense of the hand that had made its mark here, on the outer wall of the old Falah'd Palace in the heart of Hissar.

The many cultures of Seven Cities seethed with symbols, a secret pictographic language of oblique references that carried portentous weight among the natives. Such symbols formed a complex dialogue that no Malazan could understand. Slowly, during his many months resident here, Duiker had come to realize the danger behind their ignorance. As the Year of Dryjhna approached, such symbols blossomed in chaotic profusion, every wall in every city a scroll of secret code. Wind, sun and rain assured impermanence, wiping clean the slate in readiness for the next exchange.

And it seems they have a lot to say these days.

Duiker shook himself, trying to loosen the tension in his neck and shoulders. His warnings to the High Command seemed to be falling on deaf ears. There were patterns in these symbols, and it seemed that he alone

among all the Malazans had any interest in breaking the code, or even in recognizing the risks of maintaining an outsider's indifference.

He pulled his cowl further over his head in an effort to keep his face dry, feeling water trickle on his forearms as the wide cuffs of his telaba cloak briefly opened to the rain. The last of the print had washed away. Duiker pushed himself into motion, resuming his journey.

Water ran in ankle-deep torrents down the cobbled slopes beneath the palace walls, gushing down into the gutters bisecting each alley and causeway in the city. Opposite the immense palace wall, awnings sagged precariously above closet-sized shops. In the chill shadows of the holes that passed for storefronts, dour-faced merchants watched Duiker as he passed by.

Apart from miserable donkeys and the occasional swaybacked horse, the streets were mostly empty of pedestrian traffic. Even with the rare wayward current from the Sahul Sea, Hissar was a city born of inland drylands and deserts. Though a port and now a central landing for the Empire, the city and its people lived with a spiritual back to the sea.

Duiker left behind the close ring of ancient buildings and narrow alleys surrounding the palace wall, coming to the Dryjhna Colonnade that ran straight as a spear through Hissar's heart. The guldindha trees lining the colonnade's carriage track swam with blurred motion as the rain pelted down on their ochre leaves. Estate gardens, most of them unwalled and open to public admiration, stretched green on either side. The downpour had stripped flowers from their shrubs and dwarf trees, turning the cobbled walkways white, red and pink.

The historian ducked as a gusting wind pressed his cloak tight against his right side. The water on his lips tasted of salt, the only indication of the angry sea a thousand paces to his right. Where the street named after the Storm of the Apocalypse narrowed suddenly, the carriage path became a muddy track of broken cobbles and shattered pottery, the tall, once royal nut trees giving way to desert scrub. The change was so abrupt that Duiker found himself up to his shins in dung-stained water before he realized he'd come to the city's edge. Squinting against the rain, he looked up.

Off to his left, hazy behind the sheets of water, ran the stone wall of the Imperial Compound. Smoke struggled upward from beyond the wall's fortified height. On his right and much closer was a chaotic knot of hide tents, horses and camels and carts – a trader camp, newly arrived from the Sialk Odhan.

Drawing his cloak tighter against the wind, Duiker swung to the right and made for the encampment. The rain was heavy enough to mask the sound of his approach from the tribe's dogs as he entered the narrow, mud-choked pathway between the sprawling tents. Duiker paused at an intersection. Opposite was a large copper-stained tent, its walls profusely cluttered with painted symbols. Smoke drifted from the entrance flap. He crossed the intersection, hesitating only a moment before drawing the flap to one side and entering.

A roar of sound, carried on waves of hot, steam-laden air buffeted the historian as he paused to shake the water from his cloak. Voices shouting, cursing, laughing on ail sides, the air filled with durhang smoke and incense, roasting meats, sour wine and sweet ale, closed in around Duiker as he took in the scene. Coins rattled and spun in pots where a score of gamblers had gathered off to his left; in front of him a tapu weaved swiftly through the crowd, a four-foot-long iron skewer of roasted meats and fruit in each hand. Duiker shouted the tapu over, raising a hand to catch the man's eye. The hawker quickly approached.

'Goat, I swear!' the tapu exclaimed in the coastal Debrahl language. 'Goat, not dog, Dosii! Smell for yourself, and only a clipping to pay for such delicious fare! Would you pay so little in Dosin Pali?'

Born on the plains of Dal Hon, Duiker's dark skin matched that of the local Debrahl; he was wearing the telaba sea cloak of a merchant trader from the island city of Dosin Pali, and spoke the language without hint of an accent. To the tapu's claim Duiker grinned. 'For dog I would, Tapuharal.' He fished out two local crescents – the equivalent of a base 'clipping' of the Imperial silver jakata. 'And if you imagine the Mezla are freer with their silver on the island, you are a fool and worse!'

Looking nervous, the tapu slid a chunk of dripping meat and two soft amber globes of fruit from one of the skewers, wrapping them in leaves. 'Beware Mezla spies, Dosii,' he muttered. 'Words can be twisted.'

'Words are their only language,' Duiker replied with contempt as he accepted the food. 'Is it true then that a scarred barbarian now commands the Mezla army?'

'A man with a demon's face, Dosii.' The tapu wagged his head. 'Even the Mezla fear him.' Pocketing the crescents he moved off, raising the skewers once more over his head. 'Goat, not dog!'

Duiker found a tent wall to put his back against and watched the crowd as he ate his meal in local fashion, swiftly, messily. *Every meal is your last* encompassed an entire Seven Cities philosophy. Grease smeared on his face and dripping from his fingers, the historian dropped the leaves to the muddy floor at his feet, then ritually touched his forehead in a now outlawed gesture of gratitude to a Falah'd whose bones were rotting in the silty mud of Hissar Bay. The historian's eyes focused on a ring of old men beyond the gamblers and he walked over to it, wiping his hands on his thighs.

The gathering marked a Circle of Seasons, wherein two seers faced one another and spoke a symbolic language of divination in a complicated dance of gestures. As he pushed into a place among the ring of onlookers, Duiker saw the seers within the circle, an ancient shaman whose silver-barbed, skin-threaded face marked him as from the Semk tribe, far inland, and opposite him a boy of about fifteen. Where the boy's eyes should have been were two gouged pits of badly healed scar tissue. His thin limbs and bloated belly revealed an advanced stage of malnutrition. Duiker d instinctively that the boy had lost his family during the Malazan conquest and now lived in the alleys and streets of Hissar. He had been found by the Circle's organizers, for it was well known that the gods spoke through such suffering souls.

The tense silence among the onlookers told the historian that there was power in this divination. Though blind, the boy moved to keep himself face to face with the Semk seer, who himself slowly danced across a floor of

white sand in absolute silence. They held out their hands towards each other, inscribing patterns in the air between them.

Duiker nudged the man beside him. 'What has been foreseen?' he whispered.

The man, a squat local with the scars of an old Hissar regiment poorly obscured by mutilating burns on his cheeks, hissed warningly through his stained teeth. 'Nothing less than the spirit of Dryjhna, whose outline was mapped by their hands – a spirit seen by all here, a ghostly promise of fire.'

Duiker sighed. 'Would that I had witnessed that...'

'You shall – see? It comes again!'

The historian watched as the weaving hands seemed to contact an invisible figure, leaving a smear of reddish light that flickered in their wake. The glow suggested a human shape, and that shape slowly grew more defined. A woman whose flesh was fire. She raised her arms and something like iron flashed at her wrists and the dancers became three as she spun and writhed between the seers.

The boy suddenly threw back his head, words coming from his throat like the grinding of stones. 'Two fountains of raging blood! Face to face. The blood is the same, the two are the same and salty waves shall wash the shores of Raraku. The Holy Desert remembers its past!'

The female apparition vanished. The boy toppled forward, thumping stiff as a board onto the sand. The Semk seer crouched down, resting a hand on the boy's head. 'He is returned to his family,' the old shaman said in the silence of the circle. 'The mercy of Dryjhna, the rarest of gifts, granted to this child.'

Hardened tribesmen began weeping, others falling to their knees. Shaken, Duiker pulled back as the ring slowly contracted. He blinked sweat from his eyes, sensing that someone was watching him. He looked around. Across from him stood a figure shrouded in black hides, a goat's-head hood pulled up, leaving the face in shadow. A moment later the figure looked away. Duiker quickly moved from the stranger's line of sight.

He made for the tent flap.

Seven Cities was an ancient civilization, steeped in the power of antiquity, where Ascendants once walked on every trader track, every footpath, every lost road between forgotten places. It was said the sands hoarded power within their susurrating currents, that every stone had soaked up sorcery like blood, and that beneath every city lay the ruins of countless other cities, older cities, cities that went back to the First Empire itself. It was said each city rose on the backs of ghosts, the substance of spirits thick like layers of crushed bone; that each city forever wept beneath the streets, forever laughed, shouted, hawked wares and bartered and prayed and drew first breaths that brought life and the last breaths that announced death. Beneath the streets there were dreams, wisdom, foolishness, fears, rage, grief, lust and love and bitter hatred.

The historian stepped outside into the rain, drawing in lungfuls of clean, cool air as he once more wrapped cloak about him.

Conquerors could overrun a city's walls, could kill every living soul within it, fill every estate and every house and every store with its own people, yet rule nothing but the city's thin surface, the skin of the present, and would one day be brought down by the spirits below, until they themselves were but one momentary layer among many. *This is an enemy we can never defeat,* Duiker believed. *Yet history tells the stories of those who would challenge that enemy, again and again. Perhaps victory is not achieved by overcoming that enemy, but by joining it, becoming one with it.*

The Empress has sent a new Fist to batter down the restless centuries of this land. Had she abandoned Coltaine as I'd suggested to Mallick Rel? Or had she just held him back in readiness, like a weapon forged and honed for one specific task?

Duiker left the encampment, once more hunched beneath the driving rain. Ahead loomed the gates of the Imperial Compound. He might well find some answers to his questions within the next hour, as he came face to face with Coltaine of the Crow Clan.

He crossed the rutted track, sloshing through the murky puddles filling the horse and wagon ruts, then ascended the muddy slope towards the gatehouse.

Two cowled guards stepped into view as he reached the gate's narrow side passage.

'No petitions today, Dosii,' one of the Malazan soldiers said. 'Try tomorrow.'

Duiker unclasped the cloak, opened it to reveal the Imperial diadem pinned to his tunic. 'The Fist has called a council, has he not?'

Both soldiers saluted and stepped back. The one who'd spoken earlier smiled apologetically. 'Didn't know you were with the other one,' he said.

'What other one?'

'He came in just a few minutes ago, historian.'

'Yes, of course.' Duiker nodded to the two men, then passed within. The stone floor of the passage bore the muddy tracks of a pair of moccasins. Frowning, he continued on, coming to the inside compound. A roofed causeway followed the wall to his left, leading eventually to the side postern of the squat, unimaginative headquarters building. Already wet, Duiker ignored it, electing to cross the compound directly towards the building's main entrance. In passing he noticed that the man who had preceded him had done the same. The pooled prints of his steps betrayed a bowlegged gait. The historian's frown deepened.

He came to the entrance, where another guard appeared, who directed Duiker to the council room. As he approached the room's double doors, he checked for his predecessor's footprints, but there were none. Evidently he'd gone to some other chamber within the building. Shrugging, Duiker opened the doors.

The council room was low-ceilinged, its stone walls unplastered but washed in white paint. A long marble table dominated, looking strangely incomplete in the absence of chairs. Already present were Mallick Rel, Kulp, Coltaine and another Wickan officer. They all turned at the historian's

entrance, Rel's brows lifting in mild surprise. Clearly, he'd been unaware that Coltaine had extended to Duiker an invitation. Had it been the new Fist's intention to unbalance the priest, a deliberate exclusion? After a moment the historian dismissed the thought. More likely the result of a disorganized new command.

The chairs had been specifically removed for this council, as was evident in the tracks their legs had left through the white dust on the floor. The discomfort of not knowing where to stand or how to position oneself was evident in both Mallick Rel and Kulp. The Jhistal priest of Mael was shifting weight from one foot to the other, sweat on his brow reflecting the harsh glare of the lanterns set on the tabletop, his hands folded into his sleeves. Kulp looked in need of a wall to lean against, but was clearly uncertain how the Wickans would view such a casual posture.

Inwardly smiling, Duiker removed his dripping cloak, hanging it from an old torch bracket beside the doors. He then turned about and presented himself before the new Fist, who stood at the nearest end of the table, his officer on his left – a scowling veteran whose wide, flat face seemed to fold in on itself diagonally in a scar from right jawline to left brow.

'I am Duiker,' the historian said. 'Imperial Historian of the Empire.' He half bowed. 'Welcome to Hissar, Fist.' Up close, he could see that the warleader of the Crow Clan showed the weathering of forty years on the north Wickan Plains of Quon Tali. His lean, expressionless face was lined, deep brackets around the thin, wide mouth, and squint tracks at the corners of his dark, deep-set eyes. Oiled braids hung down past his shoulders, knotted with crow-feather fetishes. He was tall, wearing a battered vest of chain over a hide shirt, a crow-feather cloak hanging from his broad shoulders down to the backs of his knees. He wore a rider's leggings, laced with gut up the outer sides to his hips. A single horn-handled long-knife jutted out from under his left arm.

In answer to Duiker's words he cocked his head. 'When I last saw you,' he said in his harsh Wickan accent, 'you lay in fever on the Emperor's own cot, about to rise and walk through the Hooded One's Gates.' He paused. 'Bult was the young warrior whose lance ripped you open and for his effort a

soldier named Dujek kissed Bult's face with his sword.' Coltaine slowly turned to smile at the scarred Wickan at his side.

The grizzled horseman's scowl remained unchanged as he glared at Duiker. After a moment he shook his head and swelled his chest. 'I remember an unarmed man. The lack of weapons in his hands turned my lance at the last moment. I remember Dujek's sword that stole my beauty even as my horse bit his arm crushing bone. I remember that Dujek lost that arm to the surgeons, fouled as it was with my horse's breath. Between us, I lost the exchange, for the loss of an arm did nothing to damage Dujek's glorious career, while the loss of my beauty left me with but the one wife that I already had.'

'And was she not your sister, Bult?'

'She was, Coltaine. And blind.'

Both Wickans fell silent, the one frowning and the other scowling.

Off to one side Kulp voiced something like a strangled grunt. Duiker slowly raised an eyebrow. 'I am sorry, Bult,' he said. 'Although I was at the battle, I never saw Coltaine, nor you. In any case, I had not noticed any particular loss of your beauty.'

The veteran nodded. 'One must look carefully, it's true.'

'Perhaps,' Mallick Rel said, 'time to dispense with the pleasantries, entertaining as they are, and begin this council.'

'When I'm ready,' Coltaine said casually, still studying Duiker.

Bult grunted. 'Tell me, Historian, what inspired you to enter battle without weapons?'

'Perhaps I lost them in the melee.'

'But you did not. You wore no belt, no scabbard, you carried no shield.'

Duiker shrugged. 'If I am to record the events of this Empire, I must be in their midst, sir.'

'Shall you display such reckless zeal in recording the events of Coltaine's command?'

'Zeal? Oh yes, sir. As for reckless,' he sighed, 'alas, my courage is not as it once was. These days I wear armour when attending battle, and a short sword and shield. And helm. Surrounded by bodyguards, and at least a league away from the heart of the fighting.'

'The years have brought you wisdom,' Bult said.

'In some things, I am afraid,' Duiker said slowly, 'not enough.' He faced Coltaine. 'I would be bold enough to advise you, Fist, at this council.'

Coltaine's gaze slid to Mallick Rel as he spoke, 'And you fear the presumption, for you will say things I will not appreciate. Perhaps, in hearing such things, I shall command Bult to complete the task of killing you. This tells me much,' he continued, 'of the situation at Aren.'

'I know little of that,' Duiker said, feeling sweat trickle beneath his tunic. 'But even less of you, Fist.'

Coltaine's expression did not change. Duiker was reminded of a cobra slowly rising before him, unblinking, cold.

'Question,' Mallick Rel said. 'Has the council begun?'

'Not yet,' Coltaine said slowly. 'We await my warlock.'

The priest of Mael drew a sharp breath at that. Off to one side, Kulp took a step forward.

Duiker found his throat suddenly dry. Clearing it, he said, 'Was it not at the command of the Empress – in her first year on the throne – that all Wickan warlocks be, uh, rooted out? Was there not a subsequent mass execution? I have a memory of seeing Unta's outer walls...'

'They took many days to die,' Bult said. 'Hung from spikes of iron until the crows came to collect their souls. We brought our children to the city walls, to look upon the tribal elders whose lives were taken from us by the short-haired woman's command. We gave them memory scars, to keep the truth alive.'

'An Empress,' Duiker said, watching Coltaine's face, 'whom you now serve.'

'The short-haired woman knows nothing of Wickan ways,' Bult said. 'The crows that carried within them the greatest of the warlock souls returned to our people to await each new birth, and so the power of our elders returned to us.'

A side entrance Duiker had not noticed before slid open. A tall, bow-legged figure stepped into the room, face hidden in the shadow of a goat's-head cowl, which he now pulled back, revealing the smooth visage of a boy no more than ten years old. The youth's dark eyes met the historian's.

'This is Sormo E'nath,' Coltaine said.

'Sormo E'nath – an old man – was executed at Unta,' Kulp snapped. 'He was the most powerful of the warlocks – the Empress made sure of him. It's said he took eleven days on the wall to die. This one is not Sormo E'nath. This is a boy.'

'Eleven days,' Bult grunted. 'No single crow could hold all of his soul. Each day there came another, until he was all gone. Eleven days, eleven crows. Such was Sormo's power, his life will, and such was the honour accorded him by the black-winged spirits. Eleven came to him. *Eleven.'*

'Elder sorcery,' Mallick Rel whispered. 'Most ancient scrolls hint at such things. This boy is named Sormo E'nath. Truly the warlock reborn?'

'The Rhivi of Genabackis have similar beliefs,' Duiker said. 'A newborn child can become the vessel of a soul that has not passed through Hood's Gates.'

The boy spoke, his voice reedy but breaking, on the edge of manhood. 'I am Sormo E'nath, who carries in his breastbone the memory of an iron spike. Eleven crows attended my birth.' He hitched his cloak behind his shoulders. 'This day I came upon a ritual of divination and saw there among the crowd the historian Duiker. Together we witnessed a vision sent by a spirit of great power, a spirit whose face is one among many. This spirit promised armageddon.'

'I saw as he did,' Duiker said. 'A trader caravan has camped outside the city.'

'You were not discovered as a Malazan?' Mallick asked.

'He speaks the tribal language well,' Sormo said. 'And makes gestures announcing his hatred of the Empire. Well enough of countenance and in action to deceive the natives. Tell me, Historian, have you seen such divinations before?'

'None so ... obvious,' Duiker admitted. 'But I have seen enough signs to sense the growing momentum. The new year will bring rebellion.'

'Bold assertion,' Mallick Rel said. He sighed, clearly uncomfortable with standing. 'The new Fist would do well to regard with caution such claims. Many are the prophecies of this land, as many as there are people, it seems. Such multitudes diminish the veracity of each. Rebellion has been promised in Seven Cities each year since the Malazan conquest. What has come of them? Naught.'

'The priest has hidden motives,' Sormo said.

Duiker found himself holding his breath.

Mallick Rel's round, sweat-sheened face went white.

'All men have hidden motives,' Coltaine said, as if dismissing his warlock's claim. 'I hear counsel of warning and counsel of caution. A good balance. These are my words. The mage who yearns to lean against walls of stone views me as an adder in his bedroll. His fear of me speaks for every soldier in the Seventh Army.' The Fist spat on the floor, his face twisting. 'I care nothing for their sentiments. If they obey my commands I in turn will serve them. If they do not, I will tear their hearts from their chests. Do you hear my words, Cadre Mage?'

Kulp was scowling. 'I hear them.'

'I am here,' Rel's voice was almost shrill, 'to convey the commands of High Fist Pormqual—'

'Before or after the High Fist's official welcome?' Even as he spoke Duiker regretted his words, despite Bult's bark of laughter.

In response, Mallick Rel straightened. 'High Fist Pormqual welcomes Fist Coltaine to Seven Cities, and wishes him well in his new command. The Seventh Army remains as one of the three original armies of the Malazan Empire, and the High Fist is confident that Fist Coltaine will honour their commendable history.'

'I care nothing for reputations,' Coltaine said. 'They shall be judged by their actions. Go on.'

Trembling, Rel continued, 'The High Fist Pormqual has asked me to convey his orders to High Fist Coltaine. Admiral Nok is to leave Hissar Harbour and proceed to Aren as soon as his ships are resupplied. High Fist Coltaine is to begin preparations for marching the Seventh overland ... to Aren. It is the High Fist's desire to review the Seventh prior to its final stationing.' The priest produced a sealed scroll from his robes and set it on the tabletop. 'Such are the High Fist's commands.'

A look of disgust darkened Coltaine's features. He crossed his arms and deliberately turned his back on Mallick Rel.

Bult laughed without humour. 'The High Fist wishes to review the army. Presumably the High Fist has an attendant High Mage, perhaps a Hand of the Claw as well? If he wishes to review Coltaine's troops he can come here by Warren. The Fist has no intention of outfitting this army to march four hundred leagues so that Pormqual can frown at the dust on their boots. Such a move will leave the eastern provinces of Seven Cities without an occupying army. At this time of unrest it would be viewed as a retreat, especially when accompanied by the withdrawal of the Sahul Fleet. This land cannot be governed from behind the walls of Aren.'

'Defying the High Fist's command?' Rel asked in a whisper, eyes glittering like blooded diamonds on Coltaine's broad back.

The Fist whirled. 'I am counselling a change of those commands,' he said, 'and now await a reply.'

'Reply I shall give you,' the priest rasped.

Coltaine sneered.

Bult said, 'You? You are a priest, not a soldier, not a governor. You are not even recognized as a member of the High Command.'

Rel's glare flicked from Fist to veteran. 'I am not? Indeed—'

'Not by Empress Laseen,' Bult cut in. 'She knows nothing of you, priest, apart from the High Fist's reports. Understand that the Empress does not convey power upon people whom she does not know. High Fist Pormqual employed you as his messenger boy and that is how the Fist shall treat you. You command nothing. Not Coltaine, not me, not even a lowly mess cook of the Seventh.'

'I shall convey these words and sentiments to the High Fist.'

'No doubt. You may go now.'

Rel's jaw dropped. 'Go?'

'We are done with you. Leave.'

In silence they watched the priest depart. As soon as the doors closed Duiker turned to Coltaine. 'That may not have been wise, Fist.'

Coltaine's eyes looked sleepy. 'Bult spoke, not I.'

Duiker glanced at the veteran. The scarred Wickan was grinning.

'Tell me of Pormqual,' Coltaine said. 'You have met him?'

The historian swung back to the Fist. 'I have.'

'Does he govern well?'

'As far as I have been able to determine,' Duiker said, 'he does not govern at all. Most edicts are issued by the man you – Bult – just expelled from this council. There are a host of others behind the curtain, mostly noble-born wealthy merchants. They are the ones primarily responsible for the cuts in duty taxation on imported goods, and the corresponding increases in local taxes on production and exports – with exemptions, of course, in whatever

export they themselves are engaged in. The Imperial occupation is managed by Malazan merchants, a situation unchanged since Pormqual assumed the title of High Fist four years ago.'

Bult asked, 'Who was High Fist before him?'

'Cartheron Crust, who drowned one night in Aren Harbour.'

Kulp snorted. 'Crust could swim drunk through a hurricane, but then he went and drowned just like his brother Urko. Neither body was ever found, of course.'

'Meaning?'

Kulp grinned at Bult, but said nothing.

'Both Crust and Urko were the Emperor's men,' Duiker explained. 'It seems they shared the same fate as most of Kellanved's companions, including Toe the Elder and Ameron. None of *their* bodies were ever found, either.' The historian shrugged. 'Old history now. Forbidden history, in fact.'

'You assume they were murdered at Laseen's command,' Bult said, baring his jagged teeth. 'But imagine a circumstance where the Empress's most able commanders simply ... disappeared. Leaving her isolated, desperate for able people. You forget, Historian, that before Laseen became Empress, she was close companions with Crust, Urko, Ameron, Dassem and the others. Imagine her now alone, still feeling the wounds of abandonment.'

'And her murder of the other close companions – Kellanved and Dancer – was not something she imagined would affect her friendship with those commanders?' Duiker shook his head, aware of the bitterness in his voice. *They were my companions, too.*

'Some errors in judgement can never be undone,' Bult said. 'The Emperor and Dancer were able conquerors, but were they able rulers?'

'We'll never know,' Duiker snapped.

The Wickan's sigh was almost a snort. 'No, but if there was one person close to the throne capable of seeing what was to come, it was Laseen.'

Coltaine spat on the floor once again. 'That is all to say on the matter, Historian. Record the words that have been uttered here, if you do not find them too sour a taste.' He glanced over at a silent Sormo E'nath, frowning as he studied his warlock.

'Even if I choked on them,' Duiker replied, 'I would recount them nonetheless. I could not call myself a historian if it were otherwise.'

'Very well, then.' The Fist's gaze remained on Sormo E'nath. 'Tell me, Historian, what hold does Mallick Rel have over Pormqual?'

'I wish I knew, Fist.'

'Find out.'

'You are asking me to become a spy.'

Coltaine turned to him with a faint smile. 'And what were you in the trader's tent, Duiker?'

Duiker grimaced. 'I would have to go to Aren. I do not think Mallick Rel would welcome me to inner councils any more. Not after witnessing his humiliation here. In fact, I warrant he has marked me as an enemy now, and his enemies have a habit of disappearing.'

'I shall not disappear,' Coltaine said. He stepped closer, reached out and gripped the historian's shoulder. 'We shall disregard Mallick Rel, then. You will be attached to my staff.'

'As you command, Fist,' Duiker said.

'This council is ended.' Coltaine spun to his warlock. 'Sormo, you shall recount for me this morning's adventure ... later.'

The warlock bowed.

Duiker retrieved his cloak and, followed by Kulp, left the chamber. As the doors closed behind them, the historian plucked at the cadre mage's sleeve. 'A word with you. In private.'

'My thoughts exactly,' Kulp replied.

They found a room further down the hallway, cluttered with broken furniture but otherwise unoccupied. Kulp shut and locked the door, then faced Duiker, his eyes savage. 'He's not a man at all – he's an animal and he sees things like an animal. And Bult – Bult reads his master's snarling and raised hackles and puts it all into words – I've never heard such a talkative Wickan as that mangled old man.'

'Evidently,' Duiker said dryly, 'Coltaine had a lot to say.'

'I suspect even now the priest of Mael is planning his revenge.'

'Aye. But it was Bult's defence of the Empress that shook me.'

'Do you countenance his argument?'

Duiker sighed. 'That she regrets her actions and now feels, in full, the solitude of power? Possibly. Interesting, but its relevance is long past.'

'Has Laseen confided in these Wickan savages, do you think?'

'Coltaine was summoned to an audience with the Empress, and I'd guess that Bult is as much as sewn to his master's side – but what occurred between them in Laseen's private chambers remains unknown.' The historian shrugged. 'They were prepared for Mallick Rel, that much seems clear. And you, Kulp, what of this young warlock?'

'Young?' The cadre mage scowled. 'That *boy* has the aura of an ancient man. I could smell on him the ritual drinking of mare's blood, and that ritual marks a warlock's Time of Iron – his last few years of life, the greatest flowering of his power. Did you see him? He fired a dart at the priest, then stood silent, watching its effect.'

'Yet you claimed it was all a lie.'

'No need to let Sormo know how sensitive my nose is, and I'll continue treating him as if he was a boy, an impostor. If I'm lucky he'll ignore me.'

Duiker hesitated. The air in the room was stale, tasting of dust when he drew breath. 'Kulp,' he finally said.

'Aye, Historian, what do you ask of me?'

'It has nothing to do with Coltaine, or Mallick Rel or Sormo E'nath. I require your assistance.'

'In what?'

'I wish to free a prisoner.'

The cadre mage's brows rose. 'In Hissar's gaol? Historian, I have no clout with the Hissar Guard—'

'No, not in the city gaol. This is a prisoner of the Empire.'

'Where is this prisoner kept?'

'He was sold into slavery, Kulp. He's in the Otataral mines.'

The cadre mage stared. 'Hood's breath, Duiker, you're asking the help of a *mage?* You imagine I would willingly go anywhere near those mines? Otataral destroys sorcery, drives mages insane—'

'No closer than a dory off the island's coast,' Duiker cut in. 'I promise that, Kulp.'

'To collect the prisoner, and then what, rowing like a fiend with a Dosii war galley in hot pursuit?'

Duiker grinned. 'Something like that.'

Kulp glanced at the closed door, then studied the wreckage in the room as if he had not noticed it before. 'What chamber was this?'

'Fist Torlom's office,' Duiker answered. 'Where the Dryjhnii assassin found her that night.'

Kulp slowly nodded. 'And was our choosing it an accident?'

'I certainly hope so.'

'So do I, Historian.'

'Will you help me?'

'This prisoner ... who?'

'Heboric Light Touch.'

Kulp slowly nodded a second time. 'Let me think on it, Duiker.'

'May I ask what gives you pause?'

Kulp scowled. 'The thought of another traitorous historian loose in the world, what else?'

The Holy City of Ehrlitan was a city of white stone, rising from the harbour to surround and engulf a vast, flat-topped hill known as Jen'rahb. It was believed that one of the world's first cities was buried within Jen'rahb, and that in the compacted rubble waited the Throne of the Seven Protectors which legend held was not a throne at all, but a chamber housing a ring of seven raised daises, each sanctified by one of the Ascendants who set out to found Seven Cities. Ehrlitan was a thousand years old, but Jen'rahb the ancient city, now a hill of crushed stone, was believed to be nine times that.

An early Falah'd of Ehrlitan had begun extensive and ambitious building on the flat top of Jen'rahb, to honour the city buried beneath the streets. The quarries along the north coast were gutted, whole hillsides carved out, the ten-tonne white blocks of marble dressed and transported by ship to Ehrlitan's harbour, then pulled through the lower districts to the ramps leading to the hill's summit. Temples, estates, gardens, domes, towers and the Falah'd palace rose like the gems of a virgin crown on Jen'rahb.

Three years after the last block had been nudged into place, the ancient buried city ... shrugged. Subterranean archways collapsed beneath the immense strains of the Falah'd Crown, walls folded, foundation stones slid sideways into streets packed solid with dust. Beneath the surface the dust behaved like water, racing down streets and alleys, into gaping doorways, beneath floors – all unseen in the unrelieved darkness of Jen'rahb. On the surface, on a bright dawn marking an anniversary of the Falah'd rule, the Crown sagged, towers toppled, domes split in clouds of white marble dust, and the palace dropped unevenly, in some places no more than a few feet, in others over twenty arm-spans down into flowing rivers of dust.

Observers in the Lower City described the event. It was as if a giant invisible hand had reached down to the Crown, closing to gather in every building, crushing them all while pushing down into the hill. The cloud of dust that rose turned the sun into a copper disc for days afterwards.

Over thirty thousand people died that day, including the Falah'd himself, and of the three thousand who dwelt and worked within the Palace, but one survived: a young cook's helper who was convinced that the beaker he had dropped on the floor a moment before the earthquake was to blame for the entire catastrophe. Driven mad with guilt, he stabbed himself in the heart while standing in the Lower City's Merykra Round, his blood flowing down to drench the paving stones where Fiddler now stood.

His blue eyes narrowed, the sapper watched a troop of Red Swords ride hard through a scattering crowd on the other side of the Round.

Swathed in thin bleached linen robes, the hood pulled up and over his head in the manner of a Gral tribesman, he stood motionless on the sacred paving stone with its faded commemorative script, wondering if the rapid thumping of his heart was loud enough to be heard by the crowds moving nervously around him. He cursed himself for risking a wander through the ancient city, then he cursed Kalam for delaying their departure until he'd managed to make contact with one of his old agents in the city.

'*Mezla*'ebdin!' a voice near him hissed.

Malazan lapdogs was an accurate enough translation. The Red Swords were born of Seven Cities, yet avowed absolute loyalty to the Empress. Rare – if at the moment unwelcome – pragmatists in a land of fanatical dreamers, the Red Swords had just begun an independent crackdown on the followers of Dryjhna in their typical fashion: with sword edge and lance.

Half a dozen victims lay unmoving on the bleached stones of the Round, amidst scattered baskets, bundles of cloth, and food. Two small girls crouched beside a woman's body near the dried-up fountain. Sprays of blood decorated nearby walls. From a few streets away the alarms of the Ehrlitan Guard were ringing, the city's Fist having just been informed that the Red Swords were once again defying his inept rule.

The savage riders continued their impromptu, indiscriminate slaughter up a main avenue leading off from the Round, and were soon out of sight. Beggars and thieves swooped in on the felled bodies, even as the air filled with wailing voices. A hunchbacked pimp gathered up the two girls and hobbled out of sight up an alleyway.

A few minutes earlier Fiddler had come near to having his skull split wide open upon entering the Round and finding himself in the path of a charging Red Sword. His soldier's experience launched him across the horse's path, forcing the warrior to swing his blade to his shield side, and a final duck beneath the swishing sword took the sapper past and out of reach. The Red Sword had not bothered pursuing him, turning instead to behead the next hapless citizen, a woman desperately dragging two children from the horse's path.

Fiddler shook himself, breathing a silent curse. Pushing through the jostling crowd, he made for the alley the pimp had used. The tall, leaning buildings to either side shrouded the narrow passage in shadow. Rotting food and something dead filled the air with a thick stench. There was no-one in sight as Fiddler cautiously padded along. He came to a side track between two high walls, barely wide enough for a mule and shin-deep in dry palm leaves. Behind each high wall was a garden, the tall palm trees entwining their fronds like a roof twenty feet overhead. Thirty paces on the passage came to a dead end, and there crouched the pimp, one knee holding down the youngest girl while he pressed the other girl against the wall, fumbling at her leggings.

The pimp's head turned at the sound of Fiddler striding through the dried leaves. He had the white skin of a Skrae and showed blackened teeth in a knowing grin. 'Gral, she's yours for a half jakata, once I've broken her skin. The other will cost you more, being younger.'

Fiddler stepped up to the man. 'I buy,' he said. 'Make wives. Two jakatas.'

The pimp snorted. 'I'll make twice that in a week. Sixteen jakatas.'

Fiddler drew the Gral long-knife he'd purchased an hour earlier and pressed the edge against the pimp's throat. 'Two jakatas and my mercy,

simharal.'

'Done, Gral,' the pimp grated, eyes wide. 'Done, by the Hooded One!'

Fiddler drew two coins from his belt and tossed them into the leaves. Then he stepped back. 'I take them now.'

The simharal fell to his knees, scrabbling through the dried fronds. 'Take them, Gral, take them.'

Fiddler grunted, sheathing the knife and gathering one girl under each arm. Turning his back on the pimp, he walked out of the alley. The likelihood that the man would attempt any treachery was virtually nonexistent. Gral tribesmen often begged for insults to give cause for their favourite activity: pursuing vendettas. And it was reputedly impossible to sneak up on one from behind, so none dared try. For all that, Fiddler was thankful for the thick carpet of leaves between him and the pimp.

He exited the alleyway. The girls hung like oversized dolls in his arms, still numbed with shock. He glanced down at the face of the older one. Nine, maybe ten years of age, she stared up at him with wide, dark eyes. 'Safe now,' he said. 'If I set you down, can you walk? Can you show me where you live?'

After a long moment, she nodded.

They had reached one of the tortuous tracks that passed for a street in the Lower City. Fiddler set the girl down, cradling the other in the crook of his arm – she seemed to have fallen asleep. The older child immediately grasped his robes to keep from being pushed away by the jostling crowd, then began tugging him along.

'Home?' Fiddler asked.

'Home,' she replied.

Ten minutes later they passed beyond the market district and entered a quieter residential area, the dwellings modest but clean. The girl guided Fiddler towards a side street. As soon as they reached it, children appeared, shouting and rushing to gather around them. A moment later three armed

men burst from a garden gate. They confronted Fiddler with tulwars raised as the crowd of children dispersed on all sides, suddenly silent and watchful.

'Nahal Gral,' Fiddler growled. 'The woman fell to a Red Sword. A simharal took these two. I bought them. Unbroken. Three jakatas.'

'Two,' corrected one of the men, spitting on the cobbles at Fiddler's feet. 'We found the simharal.'

'Two to buy. One more to deliver. Unbroken. Three.' Fiddler gave them a hard grin. 'Fair price, cheap for Gral honour. Cheap for Gral protection.'

A fourth man spoke from behind Fiddler. 'Pay the Gral, you fools. A hundred gold jakatas would not be too much. The nurse and the children were under your protection, yet you fled when the Red Swords came. If this Gral had not come upon the children and purchased them, they would now be broken. Pay the coin, and bless this Gral with the Queen of Dreams' favour, bless him and his family for all time.' The man slowly stepped around. He wore the armour of a private guard, with a captain's insignia. His lean face was scarred with the hatched symbol of a veteran of Y'ghatan and on the backs of his hands were the pitted tracks of incendiary scars. His hard eyes held Fiddler's. 'I ask for your trader name, Gral, so that we may honour you in our prayers.'

Fiddler hesitated, then gave the captain his true name, the name he had been born with, long ago.

The man frowned upon hearing it, but made no comment.

One of the guards approached with coins in hand. Fiddler offered the sleeping child to the captain. 'It is wrong that she sleeps,' he said.

The grizzled veteran received the child with gentle care. 'We shall have the House Healer attend to her.'

Fiddler glanced around. Clearly the children belonged to a rich, powerful family, yet the abodes within sight were all relatively small, the homes of minor merchants and craftworkers.

'Will you share a meal with us, Gral?' the captain asked. 'The children's grandfather will wish to see you.'

Curious, Fiddler nodded. The captain led him to a low postern gate in a garden wall. The three guardsmen moved ahead to open it. The young girl was the first through.

The gate opened into a surprisingly spacious garden, the air cool and damp with the breath of an unseen stream trickling through the lush undergrowth. Old fruit and nut trees canopied the stone-lined path. On the other side rose a high wall constructed entirely of murky glass. Rainbow patterns glistened on the panes, beaded with moisture and mottled with mineral stains. Fiddler had never before seen so much glass in one place. A lone door was set in the wall, made of bleached linen stretched over a thin iron frame. Before it stood an old man dressed in a wrinkled orange robe. The deep, rich ochre of his skin was set off by a shock of white hair. The girl ran up to embrace the man. His amber eyes held steadily on Fiddler.

The sapper dropped to one knee. 'I beg your blessing, Spiritwalker,' he said in his harshest Gral accent.

The Tano priest's laughter was like blowing sand. 'I cannot bless what you are not, sir,' he said quietly. 'But please, join me and Captain Turqa in a private repast. I trust these guardians will prove eager to regain their courage in taking care of the children, here within the garden's confines.' He laid a weathered hand on the sleeping child's forehead. 'Selal protects herself in her own way. Captain, tell the Healer she must be drawn back to this world, gently.'

The captain handed the child over to one of the guards. 'You heard the Master. Quickly now.'

Both children were taken through the linen door. Gesturing, the Tano Spiritwalker led Fiddler and Turqa to the same door at a more sedate pace.

Inside the glass-walled room squatted a low iron table with shin-high hide-bound chairs around it. On the table were bowls holding fruit and chilled meats stained red with spices. A crystal carafe of pale yellow wine had been unstoppered and left to air. At the carafe's base the wine's

sediment was two fingers thick: desert flower buds and the carcasses of white honey bees. The wine's cool sweet scent permeated the chamber.

The inner door was solid wood, set in a marble wall. Small alcoves set within that wall held lit candles displaying flames of assorted colours. Their flickering reflections danced hypnotically on the facing glass.

The priest sat down and indicated the other chairs. 'Please be seated. I am surprised that a Malazan spy would so jeopardize his disguise by saving the lives of two Ehrlii children. Do you now seek to glean valuable information from a family overwhelmed by gratitude?'

Fiddler drew his hood back, sighing. 'I am Malazan,' he acknowledged. 'But not a spy. I am disguised to avoid discovery ... by Malazans.'

The old priest poured the wine and handed the sapper a goblet. 'You are a soldier.'

'I am.'

'A deserter?'

Fiddler winced. 'Not by choice. The Empress saw fit to outlaw my regiment.' He sipped the flowery sweet wine.

Captain Turqa hissed. 'A Bridgeburner. A soldier of Onearm's Host.'

'You are well informed, sir.'

The Tano Spiritwalker gestured towards the bowls. 'Please. If, after so many years of war, you are seeking a place of peace, you have made a grave error in coming to Seven Cities.'

'So I gathered,' Fiddler said, helping himself to some fruit. 'Which is why I am hoping to book passage to Quon Tali as soon as possible.'

'The Kansu Fleet has left Ehrlitan,' the captain said. 'Few are the trader ships setting forth on oceanic voyages these days. High taxes—'

'And the prospect of riches that will come with a civil war,' Fiddler said, nodding. 'Thus, it must be overland, at least down to Aren.'

'Unwise,' the old priest said.

'I know.'

But the Tano Spiritwalker was shaking his head. 'Not simply the coming war. To travel to Aren, you must cross the Pan'potsun Odhan, skirting the Holy Desert Raraku. From Raraku the whirlwind of the Apocalypse will come forth. And more, there will be a convergence.'

Fiddler's eyes narrowed. The *Soletaken dhenrabi*. 'As in a drawing-together of Ascendant powers?'

'Just so.'

'What will draw them?'

'A gate. The Prophecy of the Path of Hands. Soletaken and D'ivers. A gate promising . . . something. They are drawn as moths to a flame.'

'Why would shapeshifters have any interest in a warren's gate? They are hardly a brotherhood, nor are they users of sorcery, at least not in any sophisticated sense.'

'Surprising depth of knowledge for a soldier.'

Fiddler scowled. 'Soldiers are always underestimated,' he said. 'I've not spent fifteen years fighting Imperial wars with my eyes closed. The Emperor clashed with both Treach and Ryllandaras outside Li Heng. I was there.'

The Tano Spiritwalker bowed his head in apology. 'I have no answers to your questions,' he said quietly. 'Indeed, I do not think even the Soletaken and D'ivers are fully aware of what they seek. Like salmon returning to the waters where they were born, they act on instinct, a visceral yearning and a promise only sensed.' He folded his hands together. 'There is no unification among shapeshifters. Each stands alone. This Path of Hands –' he hesitated, then continued – 'is perhaps a means to Ascendancy – for the victor.'

Fiddler drew a slow, unsteady breath. 'Ascendancy means power. Power means control.' He met the Spiritwalker's tawny eyes. 'Should one shapeshifter attain Ascendancy—'

'Domination of its own kind, yes. Such an event would have ... repercussions. In any case, friend, the wastelands could never be called safe, but the months to come shall turn the Odhan into a place of savage horror, this much I know with certainty.'

'Thank you for the warning.'

'Yet it shall not deter you.'

'I am afraid not.'

'Then it befalls me to offer you some protection for your journey. Captain, if you would be so kind?'

The veteran rose and departed.

'An outlawed soldier,' the old priest said after a moment, 'who will risk his life to return to the heart of the Empire that has sentenced him to death. The need must be great.'

Fiddler shrugged.

'The Bridgeburners are remembered here in Seven Cities. A name that is cursed, yet admired all the same. You were honourable soldiers fighting in a dishonourable war. It is said the regiment was honed in the heat and scorched rock of the Holy Desert Raraku, in pursuit of a Falah'd company of wizards. That is a story I would like to hear some time, so that it may be shaped into song.'

Fiddler's eyes widened. A Spiritwalker's sorcery was sung, no other rituals were required. Although devoted to peace, the power in a Tano song was said to be immense. The sapper wondered what such a creation would do to the Bridgeburners.

The Tano Spiritwalker seemed to understand the question, for he smiled. 'Such a song has never before been attempted. There is in a Tano song the potential for Ascendancy, but can an entire regiment ascend? Truly a question deserving an answer.'

Fiddler sighed. 'Had I the time, I would give you that story.'

'It would take but a moment.'

'What do you mean?'

The old priest raised a long-fingered, wrinkled hand. 'If you were to let me touch you, I would know your history.'

The sapper recoiled.

'Ah,' the Tano Spiritwalker sighed, 'you fear I would be careless with your secrets.'

'I fear that your possessing them would endanger your life. Nor are all of my memories honourable.'

The old man tilted his head back and laughed. 'If they were all honourable, friend, you would be more deserving of this robe than I. Forgive me my bold request, then.'

Captain Turqa returned, carrying a small chest of weathered wood the colour of sand. He set it down on the table before his master, who raised the lid and reached inside. 'Raraku was once a sea,' the Tano said. He withdrew a bleached white conch shell. 'Such remnants can be found in the Holy Desert, provided you know the location of the ancient shores. In addition to the memory song contained within it, of that inland sea, other songs have been invested.' He glanced up, meeting Fiddler's eyes. 'My own songs of power. Please accept this gift, in gratitude for saving the lives and honour of my granddaughters.'

Fiddler bowed as the old priest set the conch shell into his hands. 'Thank you, Tano Spiritwalker. Your gift offers protection, then?'

'Of a sort,' the priest said, smiling. After a moment he rose from his seat. 'We shall not keep you any longer, Bridgeburner.'

Fiddler quickly stood.

'Captain Turqa will see you out.' He stepped close and laid a hand on Fiddler's shoulder. 'Kimloc Spiritwalker thanks you.'

The conch shell in his hands, the sapper was ushered from the priest's presence. Outside in the garden the water-cooled air plucked at the sweat on Fiddler's brow. 'Kimloc,' he muttered under his breath.

Turqa grunted beside him as they walked the path to the back gate. 'His first guest in eleven years. Do you comprehend the honour bestowed upon you, Bridgeburner?'

'Clearly,' Fiddler said dryly, 'he values his granddaughters. Eleven years, you say? Then his last guest would have been ...'

'High Fist Dujek Onearm, of the Malazan Empire.'

'Negotiating the peaceful surrender of Karakarang, the Holy City of the Tano cult. Kimloc claimed he could destroy the Malazan armies. Utterly. Yet he capitulated and his name is now legendary for empty threats.'

Turqa snorted. 'He opened the gates of his city because he values life above all things. He took the measure of your Empire and realized that the death of thousands meant nothing to it. Malaz would have what it desired, and what it desired was Karakarang.'

Fiddler grimaced. With heavy sarcasm he said, 'And if that meant bringing the T'lan Imass to the Holy City – to do to it what they did to Aren – then we would have done just that. I doubt even Kimloc's sorcery could hold back the T'lan Imass.'

They stood at the gate. Turqa swung it open, old pain in his dark eyes. 'As did Kimloc,' he said. 'The slaughter at Aren revealed the Empire's madness —'

'What happened during the Aren Rebellion was a mistake,' Fiddler snapped. 'No command was ever given to the Logros T'lan Imass.'

Turqa's only reply was a sour, bitter grin as he gestured to the street beyond. 'Go in peace, Bridgeburner.'

Irritated, Fiddler left.

Moby squealed in delight, launching itself across the narrow room to collide with Fiddler's chest in a frenzied flap of wings and clutching limbs. Swearing and pushing the familiar away as it attempted a throat-crushing embrace, the sapper crossed the threshold, closing the door behind him.

'I was starting to get worried,' Kalam rumbled from the shadows filling the room's far end.

'Got distracted,' Fiddler said.

'Trouble?'

He shrugged, stripping off his outer cloak to reveal the leather-bound chain surcoat beneath. 'Where are the others?'

'In the garden,' Kalam replied wryly.

On his way over Fiddler stopped by his backpack. He crouched and set the Tano shell inside, pushing it into the bundle of a spare shirt.

Kalam poured him a jug of watered wine as the sapper joined him at the small table, then refilled his own. 'Well?'

'A cusser in an eggshell,' Fiddler said, drinking deep before continuing. 'The walls are crowded with symbols. I'd guess no more than a week, then the streets run red.'

'We've horses, mules and supplies. We should be nearing the Odhan by then. Safer out there.'

Fiddler eyed his companion. Kalam's dark, bearish face glistened in the faint daylight from the cloth-covered window. A brace of knives rested on the pitted tabletop in front of the assassin, a whetstone beside them. 'Maybe. Maybe not.'

'The hands on the walls?'

Fiddler grunted. 'You noticed them.'

'Symbols of insurrection aplenty, meeting places announced, rituals to Dryjhna advertised – I can read all of that as well as any other native. But those unhuman handprints are something else entirely.' Kalam leaned

forward, picking up a knife in each hand. He idly crossed the blued blades. 'They seem to indicate a direction. South.'

'Pan'potsun Odhan,' Fiddler said. 'It's a convergence.'

The assassin went still, his dark eyes on the blades crossed before him. 'That's not a rumour I've heard yet.'

'It's Kimloc's belief.'

'Kimloc!' Kalam cursed. 'He's in the city?'

'So it's said.' Fiddler took another mouthful of wine. Telling the assassin of his adventures – and his meeting with the Spiritwalker – would send Kalam out through the door. *And Kimloc to Hood's Gates. Kimloc, his family, his guards. Everyone.* The man sitting across from him would take no chances. *Another gift to you, Kimloc . . . my silence.*

Footsteps sounded in the back hallway and a moment later Crokus appeared. 'It's as dark as a cave in here,' he complained.

'Where's Apsalar?' Fiddler demanded.

'In the garden – where else?' the Daru thief snapped back.

The sapper subsided. Remnants of his old unease still clung to him. *When she was out of sight, trouble would come from it. When she was out of sight you watched your back.* It was still hard to accept that the girl was no longer what she'd been. *Besides, if the Patron of Assassins chose once more to possess her, the first warning we'd get would be a knife blade across the throat.* He kneaded the taut muscles of his neck, sighing.

Crokus dragged a chair to the table, dropped into it and reached for the wine. 'We're tired of waiting,' he pronounced. 'If we have to cross this damned land, then let's do it. There's a steaming pile of rubbish behind the garden wall, clogging up the sewage gutter. Crawling with rats. The air's hot and so thick with flies you can barely breathe. We'll catch a plague if we stay here much longer.'

'Let's hope it's the bluetongue, then,' Kalam said.

'What's that?'

'Your tongue swells up and turns blue,' Fiddler explained.

'What's so good about that?'

'You can't talk.'

The stars bristled overhead, the moon yet to rise as Kalam made his way towards Jen'rahb. The old ramps climbed to the hill's summit like a giant's stairs, gap-toothed where the chiselled blocks of stone had been removed for use in other parts of Ehrlitan. Tangled scrub filled the gaps, long, wiry roots anchored deep in the slope's fill.

The assassin scrambled lithely over the rubble, staying low so that he would make little outline against the sky, should anyone glance up from the streets below. The city was quiet, its silence unnatural. The few patrols of Malazan soldiery found themselves virtually alone, as if assigned to guard a necropolis, the haunt of ghosts and scant else. Their unease had made them loud as they walked the alleys and Kalam had been able to avoid them with little effort.

He reached the crest, slipping in between two large limestone blocks that had once formed part of the summit's outer wall. He paused, breathing deep the dusty night air, and looked down on the streets of Ehrlitan. The Fist's Keep, once the home of the city's Holy Falah'd, rose dark and misshapen above a well-lit compound, like a clenched hand rising from a bed of coals. Yet within that stone edifice the military governor of the Malazan Empire cowered, shutting his ears to the heated warnings of the Red Blades and whatever Malazan spies and sympathizers had not yet been driven out or murdered. The entire occupying regiment was holed up in the Keep's own barracks, having been called in from the outlying garrison forts strategically placed around Ehrlitan's circumference. The Keep could not accommodate such numbers – the well was already foul, and soldiers slept on the bailey's flagstones under the stars. In the harbour two ancient Falari triremes were moored-off the Malazan mole and a lone undermanned company of marines

held the Imperial Docks. The Malazans were under siege with not a hand yet raised against them.

Kalam found within himself conflicting loyalties. By birth he was among the occupied, but he had by choice fought under the standards of the Empire. He'd fought for Emperor Kellanved. *And Dassem Ultor, and Whiskeyjack, and Dujek Onearm. But not Laseen. Betrayal cut those bonds long ago.* The Emperor would have cut the heart out of this rebellion with its first beat. A short but unremitting bloodbath, followed by a long peace. But Laseen had left the old wounds to fester, and what was coming would silence Hood himself.

Kalam swung back from the hill's crest. The landscape before him was a tumbled maze of shattered limestone and bricks, sinkholes and knotted shrubs. Clouds of insects hovered over black pools. Bats and rhizan darted among them.

Near the centre rose the first three levels of a tower, tilted with roots snaking down from a drought-twisted tree on its top. The maw of a doorway was visible at its base.

Kalam studied it for a time, then finally approached. He was ten paces from the opening when he saw a flicker of light within. The assassin withdrew a knife, tapped the pommel twice against a block, then crossed to the doorway. A voice from its darkness stopped him.

'No closer, Kalam Mekhar.'

Kalam spat loudly. 'Mebra, you think I don't recognize your voice? Vile rhizan like you never wander far from their nest, which is what made you so easy to find, and following you here was even easier.'

'I have important business to attend to,' Mebra growled. 'Why have you returned? What do you want of me? My debt was with the Bridgeburners, but they are no more.'

'Your debt was with me,' Kalam said.

'And when the next Malazan dog with the sigil of a burning bridge finds me, he can claim the debt as well? And the next, and the next after that? Oh

no, Kal—'

The assassin was at the doorway before Mebra realized it, lunging into the darkness, a hand flashing out unerringly to grip the spy by the throat. The man squawked, dragged from his feet as Kalam lifted him and threw him against a wall. The assassin held him there, a knife point pricking the hollow above his breastbone. Something the spy had been clutching to his chest fell, slipping between them to thud heavily at their feet. Kalam did not spare it a glance; his eyes fixed on Mebra's own.

'The debt,' he said.

'Mebra is an honourable man,' the spy gasped. 'Pays every debt! Pays yours!'

Kalam grinned. 'The hand you've just closed on that dagger at your belt had best remain where it is, Mebra. I see all that you plan. There in your eyes. Now look into mine. What do you see?'

Mebra's breath quickened. Sweat trickled down his brow. 'Mercy,' he said.

Kalam's brows rose. 'A fatal misreading—'

'No, no! I ask for mercy, Kalam! In your eyes I see only death! Mebra's death! I shall repay the debt, my old friend. I know much, all that the Fist needs to know! I can deliver Ehrlitan into his hands—'

'No doubt,' Kalam said, releasing his grip on the man's throat and stepping back. Mebra slid down the wall into a feeble crouch. 'But leave the Fist to his fate.'

The spy looked up, in his eyes a sudden cunning. 'You are outlawed. With no wish to return to the Malazan fold. You are Seven Cities once again! Kalam, may the Seven bless you!'

'I need the signs, Mebra. Safe passage through the Odhan.'

'You know them—'

'The symbols have bred. I know the *old* ones, and those will get me killed by the first tribe that finds me.'

'Passage is yours with but one symbol, Kalam. Across the breadth of Seven Cities, I swear it.'

The assassin stepped back. 'What is it?'

'You are Dryjhna's child, a soldier of the Apocalypse. Make the whirlwind gesture – do you recall it?'

Suspicious, Kalam slowly nodded. 'Yet I have seen so many more, so many new symbols. What of them?'

'Amidst the cloud of locusts there is but one,' Mebra said. 'How best to keep the Red Blades blind? Please, Kalam, you must go. I have repaid the debt.. .'

'If you have betrayed me, Adaephon Ben Delat shall know of it. Tell me, could you escape Quick Ben with his warrens unveiled?'

Mute, his face pale as the moonlight, Mebra shook his head.

'The whirlwind.'

'Yes, I swear by the Seven.'

'Do not move,' Kalam commanded. One hand on the long-knife at his belt, the assassin stepped forward, crouched and collected the object that Mebra had dropped earlier. He heard the spy's breath catch and smiled. 'Perhaps I will take this with me, as guarantee.'

'Please, Kalam—'

'Silence.' The assassin found himself holding a muslin-wrapped book. He pulled the dirt-stained cloth away. 'Hood's breath!' he whispered. 'From the High Fist's vaults at Aren ... into the hands of an Ehrlii spy.' He looked up and met Mebra's eyes. 'Does Pormqual know of the theft of that which is to unleash the Apocalypse?'

The little man grinned, displaying a row of sharp silver-capped teeth. 'The fool could have his silk pillow stolen from under him and would not know it. You see, Kalam, if you take this as guarantee, every warrior of the

Apocalypse will be hunting you. The Holy Book of Dryjhna has been freed and must return to Raraku, where the Seeress—'

'Will raise the Whirlwind,' Kalam finished. The ancient tome felt heavy as a slab of granite in his hands. Its bhederin-hide binding was stained and scarred, the lambskin pages within smelling of lanolin and bloodberry ink. And on those pages ... *words of madness, and in the Holy Desert waits Sha'ik, the Seeress, the rebellion's promised leader* . . .'You shall tell me the final secret, Mebra, the one the carrier of this Book must know.'

The spy's eyes widened with alarm. 'This cannot be your hostage, Kalam! Take me in its stead, I beg you!'

'I shall deliver it into the Holy Desert Raraku,' Kalam said. 'Into Sha'ik's own hands, and this shall purchase my passage, Mebra. And should I detect any treachery, should I see any single soldier of the Apocalypse on my trail, the Book is destroyed. Do you understand me?'

Mebra blinked sweat from his eyes, then jerked a nod. 'You must ride a stallion the colour of sand, your bloods blended. You must wear a telaba of red. Each night you must face your trail, on your knees, and unwrap the Book and call upon Dryjhna – that, and no more, not another word, for the Whirlwind goddess shall hear and obey – and all signs of your trail shall be obliterated. You must wait an hour in silence, then wrap the Book once again. It must never be exposed to sunlight, for the time of the Book's awakening belongs to Sha'ik. I shall now repeat those instructions—'

'No need,' Kalam growled.

'Are you truly an outlaw?'

'Is this not proof enough?'

'Deliver into Sha'ik's hands the Book of Dryjhna, and your name shall be sung to the heavens for all time, Kalam. Betray the cause, and your name shall ride spit into the dust.'

The assassin shrouded the Book once more in its muslin wrap, then tucked it into the folds of his tunic. 'Our words are done.'

'Blessings of the Seven, Kalam Mekhar.'

With a grunt his only reply, Kalam moved to the doorway, pausing to scan outside. Seeing no-one under the moonlight, he slipped through the opening.

Still crouched against the wall, Mebra watched the assassin leave. He strained to hear telltale sounds of Kalam crossing the rocks, bricks and rubble, but heard nothing. The spy wiped sweat from his brow, tilted his head back against the cool stone and closed his eyes.

A few minutes later he heard the rustle of armour at the tower's entrance. 'You saw him?' Mebra asked, eyes still shut.

A low voice rumbled in reply. 'Lostara follows him. He has the Book?'

Mebra's thin mouth widened in a smile. 'Not the visitor I anticipated. Oh no, I could never have imagined such a fortuitous guest. That was Kalam Mekhar.'

'The Bridgeburner? Kiss of Hood, Mebra, had I known, we would have cut him down before he'd taken a step from this tower.'

'Had you tried,' Mebra said, 'you and Aralt and Lostara would now be feeding your blood to Jen'rahb's thirsty roots.'

The large warrior barked a laugh, stepping inside. Behind him, as the spy had guessed, loomed Aralt Arpat, guarding the entrance, tall and wide enough to block most of the moonlight.

Tene Baralta rested his gauntleted hands on the sword pommels on either side of his hips. 'What of the man you first approached?'

Mebra sighed. 'As I told you, we would likely have needed a dozen nights such as this one. The man took fright and is probably halfway to G'danisban by now. He ... reconsidered, as any reasonable man would.' The spy rose to his feet, brushing the dust from his telaba. 'I cannot believe our luck, Baralta—'

Tene Baralta's mailed hand was a blur as it flashed out and struck Mebra, the spurred links raking deep gashes across the man's face. Blood spattered

the wall. The spy reeled back, hands to his torn face.

'You are too familiar,' Baralta said calmly. 'You have prepared Kalam, I take it? The proper ... instructions?'

Mebra spat blood, then nodded. 'You shall be able to trail him unerringly, Commander.'

'All the way to Sha'ik's camp?'

'Yes. But I beg you, be careful, sir. If Kalam senses you, he will destroy the Book. Stay a day behind him, even more.'

Tene Baralta removed a fragment of bhederin hide from a pouch at his belt. 'The calf yearns for its mother,' he said.

'And seeks her without fail,' Mebra finished. 'To kill Sha'ik, you shall need an army, Commander.'

The Red Blade smiled. 'That is our concern, Mebra.'

Mebra drew a deep breath, hesitating, then said, 'I ask only one thing, sir.'

'You ask?'

'I beg, Commander.'

'What is it?'

'Kalam lives.'

'Your wounds are uneven, Mebra. Allow me to caress the other side of your face.'

'Hear me out, Commander! The Bridgeburner has returned to Seven Cities. He claims himself a soldier of the Apocalypse. Yet is Kalam one to join Sha'ik's camp? Can a man born to lead content himself to follow?'

'What is your point?'

'Kalam is here for another reason, Commander. He sought only safe passage across the Pan'potsun Odhan. He takes the Book because to do so will ensure that passage. The assassin is heading south. Why? I think that is

something the Red Blades – and the Empire – would know. And such knowledge can only be gained while he yet breathes.'

'You have suspicions.'

'Aren.'

Tene Baralta snorted. 'To slip a blade between Pormqual's ribs? We would all bless that, Mebra.'

'Kalam cares nothing for the High Fist.'

'Then what does he seek at Aren?'

'I can think of only one thing, Commander. A ship bound for Malaz.' Hunched, his face pulsing with pain, Mebra watched with hooded eyes as his words sank roots into the Red Blade commander's mind.

After a long moment, Tene Baralta asked in a low voice, 'What do you plan?'

Although it cost him, Mebra smiled.

Like massive limestone slabs each resting against the other, the cliffs rose from the desert floor the height of four hundred arm-spans. Gouged across the weathered face were deep fissures, and tucked inside the largest of these, a hundred and fifty arm-spans above the sands, was a tower. A single arched window showed black against the bricks.

Mappo sighed shakily. 'I see no obvious approach, but there must be one.' He shot a glance back at his companion. 'You believe it is occupied.'

Icarium rubbed the crusted blood from his brow, then nodded. He half slid the sword from its sheath, frowning at the fragments of flesh still snagged on the notched edge.

The D'ivers had caught them unawares, a dozen leopards the colour of sand, streaming from a gully bed less than ten paces to their right as the two travellers prepared to make camp. One of the beasts had leapt onto Mappo's back, jaws closing on the nape of his neck, the fangs punching through the

Trell's tough hide. It had attacked him as if he was an antelope, seeking to bite down on his windpipe as it dragged him down, but Mappo was no antelope. Though the canines sank deep, they found only muscle. Enraged, the Trell had reached over his head and torn the animal from his shoulders. Gripping the snarling leopard by its skin at neck and hips, he had slammed it hard against a boulder, shattering its skull.

The other eleven had closed in on Icarium. Even as Mappo flung his attacker's body aside and whirled, he saw four of the beasts lying motionless around the half-blood Jaghut. Fear gripped the Trell suddenly as his gaze fell on Icarium. *How far? How far has the Jhag gone? Beru bless us, phase.*

One of the other beasts had wrapped its jaws around Icarium's left thigh and Mappo watched the warrior's ancient sword chop downward, decapitating the leopard. In a macabre detail, the head held on briefly, a blood-gushing lump protruding from the warrior's leg.

The surviving cats circled.

Mappo lunged forward, hands closing on a lashing tail. He bellowed as he swung the squalling creature through the air. Writhing, the leopard sailed seven or eight paces until it struck a rock wall, snapping its spine.

It was already too late for the D'ivers. Realizing its error, it tried to pull away, but Icarium was unrelenting. Giving voice to a keening hum, the Jhag plunged among the five remaining leopards. They scattered but not quickly enough. Blood fountained, sheared flesh thudded into the sand. Within moments five more bodies lay still on the ground.

Icarium whirled, seeking more victims, and the Trell took half a step forward. After a moment Icarium's high-pitched keening fell away and he slowly straightened from his crouch. His stony gaze found the Trell, and he frowned.

Mappo saw the beads of blood on Icarium's brow. The eerie sound was gone. Not too *far. Safe. Gods below, this path ...* I *am a fool to follow. Close, all too close.*

The scent of D'ivers blood so copiously spilled would draw others. The two had quickly repacked their camp gear and set off at a swift pace. Before leaving, Icarium withdrew a single arrow from his quiver, which he stabbed into the sand in full view.

They travelled at a dogtrot through the night. Neither was driven by fear of dying; for both of them, it was killing that brought a greater dread. Mappo prayed that Icarium's arrow would prove sufficient warning.

Dawn brought them to the eastern escarpment. Beyond the cliffs rose the range of weathered mountains that divided Raraku from the Pan'potsun Odhan.

Something had ignored the arrow and was trailing them, perhaps a league behind. The Trell had sensed it an hour earlier, a Soletaken, and the form it had taken was huge.

'Find us the ascent,' Icarium said, stringing his bow. He set out his remaining arrows, squinting back along their trail. After a hundred paces the shimmering heat that rose like a curtain obscured everything beyond. If the Soletaken came into view and charged, the Jhag had time to loose half a dozen arrows. The warrens carved into their shafts could bring down a dragon, but Icarium's expression made it clear he was sickened by the thought.

Mappo probed at the puncture wounds on the back of his neck. The torn flesh was hot, septic and crawling with flies. The muscles ached with a deep throb. He pulled a blade of jegura cactus from his pack and squeezed its juices onto the wounds. Numbness spread, allowing him to move his arms without the stabbing agony that had had him bathed in sweat over the last few hours. The Trell shivered with sudden chill. The cactus juice was so powerful it could be used only once a day, lest the numbing effect spread to the heart and lungs. And if anything, it would make the flies thirstier.

He approached the cleft in the rockface. Trell were plains dwellers. Mappo had no special skill in climbing, and he was not looking forward to the task ahead. The fissure was deep enough to swallow the sun's morning light, and narrow at the base, barely the width of his shoulders. Ducking, he

slipped inside, the cool, musty air triggering another wave of shivering. His eyes quickly adjusting, he made out the fissure's back wall six paces away. There were no stairs, no handholds. Tilting his head, he looked up. The cleft widened higher up but was unrelieved until it reached what he took to be the base of the tower. Nothing so simple as a dangling knotted rope. Growling in frustration, Mappo stepped back into the sunlight.

Icarium stood facing their trail with arrow nocked and bow raised. Thirty paces from him was a massive brown bear, down on all fours, swaying, nose lifted and testing the wind. The Soletaken had arrived.

Mappo joined his companion. 'This one is known to me,' he said quietly.

The Jhag lowered his weapon, releasing the bowstring's tension. 'He is sembling,' he said.

The bear lurched forward.

Mappo blinked against the sudden blurring of his vision. He tasted grit, nostrils twitching at the strong spicy smell that came with the change. He felt an instinctive wave of fear, a dusty dryness making swallowing difficult. A moment later the sembling was complete, and a man now strode towards them, naked and pale under the harsh sunlight.

Mappo slowly shook his head. When masked, the Soletaken was huge, powerful, a mass of muscle – yet now, in his human form, Messremb stood no more than five feet in height, was almost hairless and thin to the point of emaciation, narrow-faced and shovel-toothed. His small eyes, the colour of garnet, shone within wrinkled nests of humour that drew his mouth into a grin.

'Mappo Trell, my nose told me it was you!'

'It's been a long time, Messremb.'

The Soletaken was eyeing the Jhag. 'Aye, north of Nemil it was.'

'Those unbroken pine forests better suited you, I think,' Mappo said, his memories drawn back to that time for a moment, those freer days of massive Trellish caravans and the great journeys undertaken.

The man's grin fell away. 'That it did. And you, sir, must be Icarium, maker of mechanisms and now the bane of D'ivers and Soletaken. Know that I am greatly relieved you have lowered your bow – there was racing thunder in my chest when I watched you take aim.'

Icarium was frowning. 'I would be bane to no-one, were the choice mine,' he said. 'We were attacked without warning,' he added, the words sounding strangely uncertain.

'Meaning you had no chance to warn the hapless creature. Pity the pieces of his soul. I, however, am anything but precipitous. Cursed only with a curious nose. What scent is joined with the Trell's, *I* wondered, so close to Jaghut blood, yet different? Now that my eyes have given me answer I can resume the Path.'

'Do you know where it takes you?' Mappo asked.

Messremb stiffened. 'You have seen the gates?'

'No. What do you expect to find there?'

'Answers, old friend. Now I shall spare you the taste of my veering by putting some distance between us. Do you wish me well, Mappo?'

'I do, Messremb. And add a warning: we crossed paths with Ryllandaras four nights ago. Be careful.'

Something of the savage bear glittered in the Soletaken's eyes. 'I shall look out for him.'

Mappo and Icarium watched the man walk away, disappearing behind an outcrop of rock. 'Madness lurked within him,' Icarium said.

The Trell flinched at those words. 'Within them all,' he sighed. 'I've yet to find an ascent, by the way. The cave reveals nothing.'

The sound of shod hooves reached them, slow and plodding. From a trail paralleling the cliff face, a man on a black mule appeared. He sat cross-legged on a high wood saddle, shrouded in a ragged, dirt-stained telaba. His hands, which rested on the ornate saddlehorn, were the colour of rust. A hood hid his features. The mule was a strange-looking beast, its muzzle

black, the skin of its ears black, as were its eyes. No lightening of its ebon hue was anywhere visible with the exception of dust and spatters of what might have been dried blood.

The man swayed on the saddle as they approached. 'No way in,' he hissed, 'but the way out. It's not yet the hour. A life given for a life taken, remember those words, remember them. You are wounded. You are bright with infection. My servant will tend to you. A caring man with salty hands, one wrinkled, one pink – do you grasp the significance of that? Not yet. Not yet. So few ... guests. But I have been expecting you.'

The mule stopped opposite the cleft, swinging a mournful gaze on the two travellers as its rider struggled to pull his legs from their crossed position. Whimpers of pain accompanied the effort, until his frantic attempts overwhelmed his balance and, with a squeal of dismay, the man toppled, thumping into the dust.

Seeing crimson red bloom through the telaba's weave, Mappo stepped forward. 'You bear your own wounds, sir!'

The man writhed on the ground like an upended tortoise, his legs still trapped in their crossed position. His hood fell back, revealing a large hawk nose, tufts of wiry grey beard, a tattooed bald pate and skin like dark honey. A row of perfect white teeth showed in his grimace.

Mappo knelt beside him, squinting to see signs of the wound that had spilled so much blood. A smell of iron was pungent in the Trell's nose. After a moment he reached under the man's cloak and withdrew an unstoppered bladder. Grunting, he glanced over at Icarium. 'Not blood. Paint. Red ochre paint.'

'Help me, you oaf!' the man snapped. 'My legs!'

Bemused, Mappo helped the man unlock his legs, every move eliciting moans. As soon as they were free the man sat up and started beating his own thighs. 'Servant! Wine! Wine, damn your wood-rotted brain!'

'I am not your servant,' Mappo said coolly, stepping back. 'Nor do I carry wine when crossing a desert.'

'Not you, barbarian!' The man glared about. 'Where is he?'

'Who?'

'Servant, of course. He thinks carrying me about is his only task – ah, there!'

Following the man's gaze, the Trell frowned. 'That is a mule, sir. I doubt he could manage a wineskin well enough to fill a cup.' Mappo grinned at Icarium, but the Jhag was paying no attention to the proceedings: he had unstrung his bow and now sat on a boulder, cleaning his sword.

Still sitting on the ground, the man collected a handful of sand and flung it at the mule. Startled, the beast brayed and bolted towards the cleft, disappearing into the cave. With a grunt the man clambered to his feet and stood wobbling, hands held before him plucking at each other in some kind of nervous tic. 'Mostly rude greeting of guests,' he said, attempting a smile. 'Most. Most rude greeting, was meant. Meaningless apologies and kindly gestures very important. I am so sorry for temporary collapse of hospitality. Oh yes, I am. I would have more practice if I wasn't the master of this temple. An acolyte is obliged to fawn and scrape. Later to mutter and gripe with his comrades in misery. Ah, here comes Servant.'

A wide-shouldered, bow-legged man in black robes had emerged from the cave, carrying a tray bearing a jug and clay cups. He wore a servant's veil over his features, with only a thin slit for his eyes, which were deep brown.

'Lazy fool! Did you see any cobwebs?'

Servant's accent caught Mappo by surprise. It was Malazan. 'None, Iskaral.'

'Call me by my title!'

'High Priest—'

'Wrong!'

'High Priest Iskaral Pust of the Tesem Temple of Shadow—'

'Idiot! You are Servant! Which makes me .. .'

'Master.'

'Indeed.' Iskaral turned to Mappo. 'We rarely talk,' he explained.

Icarium joined them. 'This is Tesem, then. I was led to believe it was a monastery, sanctified to the Queen of Dreams—'

'They left,' Iskaral snapped. 'Took their lanterns with them, leaving only ...'

'Shadows.'

'Clever Jhag, but I was warned of that, oh yes. You two are sick as undercooked pigs. Servant has prepared your chambers. And broths of healing herbs, roots, potions and elixirs. White Paralt, emulor, tralb—'

'Those are poisons,' Mappo pointed out.

'Are they? No wonder the pig died. It's almost time, shall we prepare to ascend?'

'Lead the way,' Icarium invited.

'A life given for a life taken. Follow me. None can outwit Iskaral Pust.' The High Priest faced the cleft with a fierce squint.

They waited, for what Mappo had no idea. After a few minutes the Trell cleared his throat. 'Will your acolytes send down a ladder?'

'Acolytes? I have no acolytes. No opportunity for tyranny. Very sad, no muttering and grumbling behind my back, few satisfying rewards for this High Priest. If not for my god's whispering, I wouldn't bother, be assured of that, and I trust you will take that into account with all I have done and am about to do.'

'I see movement in the fissure,' Icarium said.

Iskaral grunted. 'Bhok'arala, they nest on this cliffside. Foul mewling beasts, always interfering, sniffing at this and that, pissing on the altar, defecating on my pillow. They are my plague, they have singled me out, and why? I've not skinned a single one, nor cooked their brains to scoop out

of their skulls in civilized repast. No snares, no traps, no poison, yet still they pursue me. There is no answer to this. I despair.'

As the sun sank further the bhok'arala grew bolder, flapping from perch to perch high on the cliff wall, scampering with their hands and feet along cracks in the stone, seeking the rhizan as the small flying lizards emerged for their night-feeding. Small and simian, the bhok'arala were winged like bats, tailless with hides mottled tan and brown. Apart from long canines, their faces were remarkably human.

From the tower's lone window a knotted rope tumbled down. A tiny round head poked out to peer down at them.

'Of course,' Iskaral added, 'a few of them have proved useful.'

Mappo sighed. He'd been hoping for some sorcerous means of ascent to appear, something worthy of a High Priest of Shadow. 'So now we climb.'

'Most certainly not,' Iskaral replied with indignation. 'Servant climbs, then pulls us up.'

'He would be a man of formidable strength to manage me,' the Trell said. 'And Icarium, too.'

Servant set down the tray he had been holding, spat on his hands and walked over to the rope. He launched himself upward with surprising agility. Iskaral crouched by the tray and poured wine into the three cups.

'Servant's half bhokar'al. Long arms. Muscles like iron. Makes friends with them, probable source of all my ills.' Iskaral collected a cup for himself and gestured down at the tray as he straightened. 'Fortunate for Servant I am such a gentle and patient master.' He swung to check on the man's climb. 'Hurry, you snub-tailed dog!'

Servant had already reached the window and was now clambering through it and out of sight.

'Ammanas's gift, is Servant. A life given for a life taken. One hand old, one hand new. This is true remorse. You'll see.'

The rope twitched. The High Priest quaffed down the last of his wine, flung the cup away and scrambled towards the rope. 'Too long exposed! Vulnerable. Quickly now!' He wrapped his hands around a knot, set his feet atop another. 'Pull! Are you deaf? Pull!'

Iskaral shot upward.

'Pulleys,' Icarium said. 'Too fast to be otherwise.'

The pain returning to his shoulders, Mappo winced, then said, 'Not what you were expecting, I take it.'

'Tesem,' Icarium said, watching the priest vanish through the window. 'A place of healing. Solitary reflection, repository of scrolls and tomes, and insatiable nuns...'

'Insatiable?'

The Jhag glanced at his friend, an eyebrow rising. 'Indeed.'

'Oh, sad demise.'

'Very.'

'In this instance,' Mappo said as the rope tumbled back down, 'I think solitary reflection has addled a brain. Battling wits with bhok'arala and the whisperings of a god most hold as himself insane...'

'Yet there is power here, Mappo,' Icarium said in a low voice.

'Aye,' the Trell agreed as he approached the rope. 'A warren opened in the cave when the mule entered.'

'Then why does the High Priest not use it?'

'I doubt we'll find easy answers to Iskaral Pust, friend.'

'Best hold tight, Mappo.'

'Aye.'

Icarium reached out suddenly, rested a hand on Mappo's shoulder. 'Friend.'

'Aye?'

The Jhag was frowning. 'I am missing an arrow, Mappo. More, there is blood on my sword, and I see upon you dreadful wounds. Tell me, did we fight? I recall... nothing.'

The Trell was silent a long moment, then he said, 'I was beset by a leopard while you slept, Icarium. Made some use of your weapons. I did not think it worthy of mention.'

Icarium's frown deepened. 'Once again,' he slowly whispered, 'I have lost time.'

'Nothing of worth, friend.'

'You would tell me otherwise?' There was a look of desperate pleading in the Jhag's grey eyes.

'Why would I not, Icarium?'

CHAPTER THREE

> The Red Blades were, at this time, pre-eminent among those pro-Malazan organizations that arose in occupied territories. Viewing themselves as progressive in their embrace of the values of imperial unification, this quasi-military cult became infamous with their brutal pragmatism when dealing with dissenting kin ...
>
> *Lives of the Conquered*
> Hem Trauth

Felisin lay unmoving beneath Beneth until, with a final shudder, he was done. He pushed himself off and grabbed a handful of her hair. His face was flushed under the grime and his eyes gleamed in the lamp glow. 'You'll learn to like it, girl,' he said.

The edge of something savage always rose closer to the surface immediately after he'd lain with her. She knew it would pass. 'I will,' she said. 'Does he get a day of rest?'

Beneth's grip tightened momentarily, then relaxed. 'Aye, he does.' He moved away, began tying up his breeches. 'Though I don't much see the point. The old man won't last another month.' He paused, his breath harsh as he studied her. 'Hood's breath, girl, but you're beautiful. Show me some life next time. I'll treat you right. Get you soap, a new comb, lousebane. You'll work here in Twistings, that's a promise. Show pleasure, girl, that's all I ask.'

'Soon,' she said. 'Once it stops hurting.'

The day's eleventh bell had sounded. They were in the third reach off Twistings Far shaft. The reach had been gouged out by the Rotlegs and was

barely high enough to crawl for most of its quarter-mile length. The air was close and stank of Otataral dust and sweating rock.

Virtually everyone else would have reached Nearlight by now, but Beneth moved in Captain Sawark's shadow and could do as he pleased. He had claimed the abandoned reach as his own. It was Felisin's third visit. The first time had been the hardest. Beneth had picked her within hours of her arrival at Skullcup, the mining camp in the Dosin Pit. He was a big man, bigger than Baudin and though a slave himself he was master of every other slave, the guards' inside man, cruel and dangerous. He was also astonishingly handsome.

Felisin had learned fast on the slave ship. She had nothing but her body to sell, but it had proved a valuable currency. Giving herself to the ship guards had been repaid with more food for herself, Heboric and Baudin. By opening her legs to the right men she had managed to get herself and her two companions chained on the keel ramp rather than in the sewage-filled water that sloshed shin-deep beneath the hold's walkway. Others had rotted in that water. Some had drowned when starvation and sickness so weakened them that they could not stay above it.

Heboric's grief and anger at the price she paid had at first been difficult to ignore, filling her with shame. But it had paid for their lives, and that was a truth that could not be questioned. Baudin's only reaction had been – and continued to be – a regard without expression. He watched her as would a stranger unable to decide who or what she was. Yet he had held to her side, and now stood close to Beneth as well. Some kind of arrangement had been made between them. When Beneth was not there to protect her, Baudin was.

On the ship she had learned well the tastes of men, as well as those of the few women guards who'd taken her to their bunks. She'd thought she'd be prepared for Beneth, and in most ways she was. *Everything but his size.*

Wincing, Felisin pulled on her slave tunic.

Beneth watched her, his high cheekbones harsh ridges beneath his eyes, his long, curly black hair glistening with whale oil. 'I'll give the old man Deepsoil if you like,' he said.

'You'd do that?'

He nodded. 'For you I'll change things. I won't take any other woman. I'm king of Skullcup, you'll be my queen. Baudin will be your personal guard – I trust him.'

'And Heboric?'

Beneth shrugged. 'Him I don't trust. And he's not much use. Pulling the carts is about all he can do. The carts, or a plough at Deepsoil.' His gaze flickered at her. 'But he's your friend, so I'll find something for him.'

Felisin dragged her fingers through her hair. 'It's the carts that are killing him. If you've sent him to Deepsoil just to pull a plough, it's not much of a favour—'

Beneth's scowl made her wonder if she'd pushed too far. 'You've never pulled a cart full of stone, girl. Pulled one of those up through half a league of tunnels, then going back down and pulling another one, three, four times a day. Compare that to dragging a plough through soft, broken soil? Dammit, girl, if I'm to move the man off the carts, I've got to justify it. Everyone works in Skullcup.'

'That's not the whole story, is it?'

He turned his back on her in answer, and began crawling up the reach. 'I've Kanese wine awaiting us, and fresh bread and cheese. Bula's made a stew for the guards and we've got a bowl each.'

Felisin followed. The thought of food made her mouth water. If there was enough cheese and bread she could save some for Heboric, though he insisted that it was fruit and meat that was needed. But both were worth their weight in gold, and just as rare in Skullcup. He'd be grateful enough for what she brought him, she knew.

It was clear that Sawark had received orders to see the historian dead. Nothing so overt as murder – the political risks were too great for that – rather, the slow, wasting death of poor diet and overwork. That he had no hands gave the Pit Captain sufficient reason to assign Heboric to the carts. Daily he struggled at his harness, hauling hundreds of pounds of broken

rock up the Deep Mine to the shaft's Nearlight. In every other harness was an ox. The beasts each hauled three carts, while Heboric pulled but one: the only acknowledgement the guards made to his humanity.

Beneth was aware of Sawark's instructions, Felisin was certain of that. The 'king' of Skullcup had limits to his power, for all his claims otherwise.

Once they reached the main shaft, it was four hundred paces to Twistings' Nearlight. Unlike Deep Mine, with its thick, rich and straight vein of Otataral running far under the hills, Twistings followed a folded vein, rising and diving, buckling and turning through the limestone.

Unlike the iron mines on the mainland, Otataral never ran down into true bedrock. Found only in limestone, the veins ran shallow and long, like rivers of rust between compacted beds filled with fossil plants and shellfish.

Limestone is just the bones of things once living, Heboric had said their second night in the hovel they'd claimed off Spit Row – before Beneth had moved them to the more privileged neighbourhood behind Bula's Inn. *I'd read that theory before and am now myself convinced. So now I'm led to believe that Otataral is not a natural ore.*

That's important? Baudin had asked.

If not natural, then what? Heboric grinned. *Otataral, the bane of magic, was born of magic. If I was less scrupulous a scholar, I'd write a treatise on that.*

What do you mean? Felisin asked.

He *means,* Baudin said, *he'd be inviting alchemists and mages to experiment in making their own Otataral.*

Is that a problem?

Those veins we dig, Heboric explained, *they're like a layer of once melted fat, a deep river of it sandwiched between layers of limestone. This whole island had to melt to make those veins. Whatever sorcery created Otataral proved beyond controlling. I would not want to be responsible for unleashing such an event all over again.*

A single Malazan guard waited at Nearlight's gate. Beyond him stretched the raised road that led into the pit town. At the far end, the sun was just setting beyond the pit's ridge line, leaving Skullcup in its early shadow, a pocket of gloom that brought blessed relief from the day's heat.

The guard was young, resting his vambraced forearms on the cross blades of his pike.

Beneth grunted. 'Where's your mate, Pella?'

'The Dosii pig wandered off, Beneth. Maybe you can tune Sawark's ear – Hood knows he's not hearing us. The Dosii regulars have lost all discipline. They ignore the duty rosters, spend all their time tossing coins at Bula's. There's seventy-five of us and over two hundred of them, Beneth, and all this talk of rebellion ... explain it to Sawark—'

'You don't know your history,' Beneth said. 'The Dosii have been on their knees for three hundred years. They don't know any other way to live. First it was mainlanders, then Falari colonists, now you Malazans. Calm yourself, boy, before you lose face.'

'"History comforts the dull-witted,"' the young Malazan said.

Beneth barked a laugh as he reached the gate. 'And whose words are those, Pella? Not yours.'

The guard's brows rose, then he shrugged. 'I forget you're Korelri sometimes, Beneth. Those words? Emperor Kellanved.' Pella's gaze slid to Felisin with a hint of sharpness. 'Duiker's *Imperial Campaigns, Volume One.* You're Malazan, Felisin, do you recall what comes next?'

She shook her head, bemused by the young man's veiled intensity. *I've learned to read faces – Beneth senses nothing.* 'I'm not that familiar with Duiker's works, Pella.'

'Worth learning,' the guard said with a smile.

Sensing Beneth's growing impatience at the gate, Felisin stepped past Pella. 'I doubt there's a single scroll in Skullcup,' she said.

'Maybe you'll find someone's memory worth dragging a net through, eh?'

Felisin glanced back with a frown.

'The boy flirting with you?' Beneth asked from the ramp. 'Be gentle, girl.'

'I'll think on that,' Felisin told Pella in a low voice before resuming her walk through the Twistings Gate. Joining Beneth on the raised road, she smiled up at him. 'I don't like nervous types.'

He laughed. 'That puts me at ease.'

Blessed *Queen of Dreams, make that true.*

Rubble-filled pits lined the raised road until it joined the other two roads at the Three Fates crossing, a broad fork that was flanked by two squat Dosii guardhouses. North of Twistings Road, and on their right as they approached the forks, was Deep Mine Road; to the south and on their left ran Shaft Road, leading to a worked-out mine where the dead were disposed of each dusk.

The body wagon was nowhere to be seen, meaning it had been held up on its route through the pit town, with more than the usual number of bodies being brought out and tossed onto its bed.

They crossed the fork and continued on to Work Road. Past the north Dosii guardhouse was Sinker Lake, a deep pool of turquoise-coloured water stretching all the way to the north pit wall. It was said the water was cursed and to dive into it was to disappear. Some believed a demon lived in its depths. Heboric asserted that the lack of buoyancy was a quality of the lime-saturated water itself. In any case, few slaves were foolish enough to try an escape in that direction, for the pit wall was as sheer on the north side as it was on the others, forever weeping water over a skin of deposits that glimmered like wet, polished bone.

Heboric had asked Felisin to keep an eye on Sinker Lake's water level in any case, now that the dry season had come, and as they walked Work Road, she studied the far side as best she could in the dim light. A line of crust was visible a hand's span above the surface. The news would please him, though she had no idea why. The notion of escape was absurd. Beyond the pit was lifeless desert and withered rock, with no drinkable water in any

direction for days. Those slaves who somehow made it up to the pit edge, and then eluded the patrols on Beetle Road, the track that surrounded the pit, had left their bones in the desert's red sands. Few got that far, and the spikes named Salvation Row on the sheer wall of the Tower at Rust Ramp displayed their failure for all to see. Not a week went past without a new victim appearing on the Tower wall. Most died before the first day was through, but some lingered longer.

Work Road ran its worn cobbles past Bula's Inn on the right and the row of brothels on the left before opening out into Rathole Round. In the round's centre rose Sawark's Keep, a hexagonal tower of cut limestone three storeys high. Only Beneth among all the slaves had ever been inside.

Twelve thousand slaves lived in Skullcup, the vast mining pit thirty leagues north of the island's lone city on the south coast, Dosin Pali. In addition to them and the three hundred guards there were locals: prostitutes for the brothels, serving staff for Bula's Inn and the gambling halls, a caste of servants who had bound their lives and the lives of their families to the Malazan soldiery, hawkers for the struggling market that filled Rathole Round on Rest Day, and a scattering of the banished, the destitute and the lost who'd chosen a pit town over the rotting alleyways of Dosin Pali.

'The stew will be cold,' Beneth muttered as they approached Bula's Inn.

Felisin wiped sweat from her brow. 'That will be a relief.'

'You're not yet used to the heat. In a month or two you'll feel the chill of night just like everyone else.'

'These early hours still hold the day's memory. I feel the cold of midnight and the hours beyond, Beneth.'

'Move in with me, girl. I'll keep you warm enough.'

He was already on the edge of one of his sudden dark moods. She said nothing, hoping he would let it go for the moment.

'Be careful of what you refuse,' Beneth rumbled.

'Bula would take me to her bed,' she said. 'You could watch, perhaps join in. She'd be sure to warm the bowls for us. Even second helpings.'

'She's old enough to be your mother,' Beneth growled.

And you my father. But she heard his breathing change. 'She's round and soft and warm, Beneth. Think on that.'

She knew he would, and the subject of moving in with him would drift away. For this *night, at least. Heboric's wrong. There's no point in thinking about tomorrow. Just the* next *hour, each hour. Stay alive, Felisin, and live well if you can.* One *day you'll find yourself face to face with your sister, and an ocean of blood pouring from Tavore's veins won't be enough, though all they hold will suffice. Stay alive, girl, that's all you must do. Survive each hour, the next hour . . .*

She slipped her hand into Beneth's as they reached the inn's door, and felt in it the sweat born of the visions she had given him.

One day, face to face, sister.

Heboric was still awake, bundled in blankets and crouched beside the hearthfire. He glanced up as Felisin climbed into the room and locked the floor hatch. She collected a sheepskin wrap from a chest and pulled it around her shoulders.

'Would you have me believe you've come to enjoy the life you've chosen, girl? Nights like these and I wonder.'

'I thought you'd be tired of judgements by now, Heboric,' Felisin said as she collected a wineskin from a peg and picked through a pile of gourd shells seeking a clean one. 'I take it Baudin's not back yet. Seems even the minor chore of cleaning our cups is beyond him.' She found one that would pass without too close an inspection and squeezed wine into it.

'That will dry you out,' Heboric observed. 'Not your first of the night either, I'd wager.'

'Don't father me, old man.'

The tattooed man sighed. 'Hood take your sister anyway,' he muttered. 'She wasn't satisfied with seeing you dead. She'd rather turn her fourteen-year-old sister into a whore. If Fener has heard my prayers, Tavore's fate will exceed her crimes.'

Felisin drained half the cup, her eyes veiled as she studied Heboric. 'I entered my sixteenth year last month,' she said.

His eyes looked suddenly very old as he met her gaze for a moment before returning his attention to the hearth.

Felisin refilled the cup, then joined Heboric at the square, raised fireplace. The burning dung in the groundstone basin was almost smokeless. The pedestal the basin sat on was glazed and filled with water. Kept hot by the fire, the water was used for washing and bathing, while the pedestal radiated enough heat to keep the night's chill from the single room. Fragments of Dosii spun rug and reed mats cushioned the floorboards. The entire dwelling was raised on stilts five feet above the sands.

Sitting down on a low wooden stool, Felisin pushed her chilled feet close to the pedestal. 'I saw you at the carts today,' she said, her words slightly slurred. 'Gunnip walked beside you with a switch.'

Heboric grunted. 'That amused them all day, Gunnip telling his guards he was swatting flies.'

'Did he break skin?'

'Aye, but Fener's tracks heal me well, you know that.'

'The wounds, yes, but not the pain – I can see, Heboric'

His glance was wry. 'Surprised you can see anything, lass. Is that durhang I smell, too? Careful with that, the smoke will pull you into a deeper and darker shaft than Deep Mine could ever reach.'

Felisin held out a pebble-sized black button. 'I deal with my pain, you deal with yours.'

He shook his head. 'I appreciate the offer, but not this time. You hold there in your hand a month's pay for a Dosii guard. I'd advise you to use it in

trade.'

She shrugged, returning the durhang to the pouch at her belt. 'I've nothing I need that Beneth won't give me already. All I need do is ask.'

'And you imagine he gives it to you freely.'

She drank. 'As good as. You're being moved, Heboric. To Deepsoil. Starting tomorrow. No more Gunnip and his switch.'

He closed his eyes. 'Why does thanking you leave such a bitter taste in my mouth?'

'My wine-soaked brain whispers *hypocrisy.'*

She watched the colour leave his face. *Oh, Felisin, too much durhang, too much wine! Do I only do good for Heboric to give me salt for his wounds? I've no wish to be so cruel.* She withdrew from beneath her tunic the food she had saved for him, leaned forward and placed the small wrapped bundle in his lap. 'Sinker Lake has dropped another hand's width.'

He said nothing, eyes on the stumps at the ends of his wrists.

Felisin frowned. There was something else she wanted to tell him, but her memory failed her. She finished the wine and straightened, running both hands back through her hair. Her scalp felt numb. She paused, seeing Heboric surreptitiously glance at her breasts, round and full under the stretched tunic. She held the pose a moment longer than was necessary, then slowly lowered her arms. 'Bula has fantasies of you,' she said slowly. 'It's the .. . possibilities ... that intrigue her. It would do you some good, Heboric'

He spun away off the stool, the untouched food bundle falling to the floor. 'Hood's breath, girl!'

She laughed, watching him sweep aside the hanging that separated his cot from the rest of the room, then clumsily yank it back behind him. After a moment her laughter fell away, and she listened to the old man climb onto his cot. I'd *hoped to make you smile, Heboric,* she wanted to explain. And *I didn't want my laughter to sound so . . . hard. I'm not what you think I am.*

Am I?

She retrieved the wrapped food and placed it on the shelf above the basin.

An hour later, with Felisin lying awake on her cot and Heboric on his, Baudin returned. He stoked up the hearth, moving about quietly. Not drunk. She wondered where he'd been. She wondered where he went every night. It would not be worth asking him. Baudin had few words for anyone, and even fewer for her.

After a moment she was forced to reconsider, as she heard the man flick a finger against Heboric's divider. He responded promptly with low words she could not make out, and Baudin whispered something back. The conversation continued a minute longer, then Baudin softly grunted his laugh-grunt and moved off to his own bed.

The two were planning something, but it was not this that shook her. It was that she was being excluded. A flash of anger followed this realization. *I've kept them alive! I've made their lives easier – since the transport ship! Bula's right, every man's a bastard, good enough only to be used. Very well, see for yourselves what Skullcup is for everyone else, I'm done with favours. I'll see you back on the carts, old man, I swear it.* She found herself fighting tears, and knew she would do nothing of the sort. She needed Beneth, that was true enough, and she'd pay to keep him. But she needed Heboric and Baudin as well, and a part of her clung to them as a child to parents, denying the hardness that everywhere else filled her world. To lose that – to lose them – would be to lose ... *everything.*

Clearly, they thought that she'd sell their trust as readily as she did her own body, but it wasn't true. I *swear it's not true.*

Felisin stared up into the darkness, tears streaming from her eyes. I'm *alone. There's just Beneth now. Beneth and his wine and his durhang and his body.* She still ached between her legs from when Beneth had finally joined her and Bula on the innkeeper's huge bed.

It was, she told herself, simply a matter of will to turn pain into pleasure.

Survive each hour.

The quayside market had begun drawing the morning crowds, reinforcing the illusion that this day was no different from any other. Chilled with a fear that even the rising sun could not master, Duiker sat cross-legged on the sea wall, his gaze travelling out over the bay into Sahul Sea, willing the return of Admiral Nok and the fleet.

But those were orders even Coltaine could not countermand. The Wickan had no authority over the Malazan warships, and Pormqual's recall had seen the Sahul Fleet depart Hissar's harbour this very morning for the month-long journey to Aren.

For all the pretence of normality, the departure had not gone unnoticed by Hissar's citizens, and the morning market was increasingly shrill with laughter and excited voices. The oppressed had won their first victory, and all that would distinguish it from those to follow was its bloodlessness. Or so ran the sentiment.

The only consolation Duiker could consider was that the Jhistal High Priest Mallick Rel had departed with the fleet. It was not a difficult thing, however, to imagine the report the man would prepare for Pormqual.

A Malazan sail in the strait caught his eye, a small transport coming in from the northeast. *Dosin Pali on the island, perhaps,* or *from farther up the coast.* It would be an unscheduled arrival, making Duiker curious.

He felt a presence at his side and glanced over to see Kulp clambering up onto the wide, low wall, dangling his legs down to the cloudy water ten paces below. 'It's done,' he said, as if the admission amounted to a confession of foul murder. 'Word has been sent in. Assuming your friend is still alive, he'll receive his instructions.'

'Thank you, Kulp.'

The mage shifted uneasily. He rubbed at his face, squinting at the transport ship as it entered the harbour. A patrol dory approached the craft as the crew struck the lone sail. Two men in glinting armour stood on deck, watching as the dory came alongside.

One of the armoured men leaned over the gunwale and addressed the harbour official. A moment later the dory's oarsmen were swinging the craft around with obvious haste.

Duiker grunted. 'Did you see that?'

'Aye,' Kulp growled.

The transport glided towards the Imperial Pier, pushed along by a low bank of oars that had appeared close to the hull's waterline. A moment later the pier-side oars withdrew back into the ship. Dockmen scrambled to receive the cast lines. A broad gangplank was being readied and horses were now visible on the deck.

'Red Blades,' Duiker said as more armoured men appeared on the transport, standing alongside their mounts.

'From Dosin Pali,' Kulp said. 'I recognize the first two: Baria Setral and his brother Mesker. They have another brother, Orto. He commands the Aren Company.'

'The Red Blades,' the historian mused. 'They've no illusions about the state of affairs. Word's come they are attempting to assert control in other cities, and here we are to witness a doubling of their presence in Hissar.'

'I wonder if Coltaine knows.'

A new tension filled the market; heads had turned and eyes now observed as Baria and Mesker led their troops onto the pier. The Red Blades were equipped and presented for war. They bristled with weapons, with full chain leggings and the slitted visors on their helms lowered. Bows were strung, arrows loosened in their quivers. The horse-blades were unsheathed and jutting from their mounts' forelegs.

Kulp spat nervously. 'Don't like the look of this,' he muttered.

'It looks as if—'

'They intend to attack the market,' Kulp said. 'This isn't just for show, Duiker. Fener's hoof!'

The historian glanced at Kulp, his mouth dry. 'You've opened your warren.'

Not replying, the mage slid off the sea wall, eyes on the Red Blades who were now mounted and lining up at pier's end, facing five hundred citizens who had fallen silent and were now backing away, filling the aisles between the carts and awnings. The contraction of the crowd would trigger panic, which was precisely what the Red Blades intended.

Lances dangling from loops of rawhide around their wrists, the Red Blades nocked arrows, the horses quivering under them but otherwise motionless.

The crowd seemed to shiver in places, as if the ground was shifting beneath it. Duiker saw figures moving, not away, but towards the facing line.

Kulp took half a dozen steps towards the Red Blades.

The figures pushed through the last of the crowd, pulling away their telaba cloaks and hoods, revealing leather armour with stitched black iron scales. Long-knives flashed in gloved hands. Dark eyes in tanned, tattooed Wickan faces held cold and firm on Baria and Mesker Setral and their warriors.

Ten Wickans now faced the forty-odd Red Blades, the crowd behind them as silent and as motionless as statues.

'Stand aside!' Baria bellowed, his face dark with fury. 'Or die!'

The Wickans laughed with fearless derision.

Pushing himself forward, Duiker followed Kulp as the mage strode hurriedly towards the Red Blades.

Mesker snapped out a curse upon seeing Kulp approach. His brother glanced over, scowling.

'Don't be a fool, Baria!' the mage hissed.

The commander's eyes narrowed. 'Fling magic at me and I'll cut you down,' he said.

Now at closer range, Duiker saw the Otataral links interwoven in Baria's chain armour.

'We shall cut this handful of barbarians down,' Mesker growled, 'then properly announce our arrival in Hissar ... with the blood of traitors.'

'And five thousand Wickans will avenge the deaths of their kin,' Kulp said. 'And not with quick sword strokes. No, you'll be hung still alive from the sea-wall spikes. For the seagulls to play with. Coltaine's not yet your enemy, Baria. Sheathe your weapons and report to the new Fist, Commander. To do otherwise will be to sacrifice your life and the lives of your soldiers.'

'You ignore me,' Mesker said. 'Baria is not my keeper, Mage.'

Kulp sneered. 'Be silent, pup. Where Baria leads, Mesker follows, or will you now cross blades with your brother?'

'Enough, Mesker,' Baria rumbled.

His brother's tulwar rasped from its scabbard. 'You dare command me!'

The Wickans shouted encouragement. A few brave souls in the crowd behind them laughed.

Mesker's face was sickly with rage.

Baria sighed. 'Brother, this is not the time.'

A mounted troop of Hissar Guard appeared above the heads of the crowd, pushing along the aisles between the market stalls. A chorus of hoots sounded to their left and Duiker and the others turned to see three score Wickan bowmen with arrows nocked and bows drawn on the Red Blades.

Baria slowly raised his left hand, making a twisting gesture. His warriors lowered their own weapons.

Snarling with disgust, Mesker slammed his tulwar back into its wooden scabbard.

'Your escort has arrived,' Kulp said dryly. 'It seems the Fist has been expecting you.'

Duiker stood at the mage's side and watched as Baria led the Red Blades forward to meet the Hissari troop. The historian shook himself. 'Hood's breath, Kulp, that was a chancy cast of the knuckles!'

The man grunted. 'You can always count on Mesker Setral,' he said. 'As brainless as a cat and just as easy to distract. For a moment there I was hoping Baria would accept the challenge – whatever the outcome, there'd be one less Setral, and that's an opportunity missed.'

'Those disguised Wickans,' Duiker said, 'were not part of any official welcome. Coltaine had infiltrated the market.'

'A cunning dog, is Coltaine.'

Duiker shook his head. 'They've shown themselves now.'

'Aye, and showed as well they were ready to lay down their lives to protect the citizens of Hissar.'

'Had Coltaine been here, I doubt he would have ordered those warriors forward, Kulp. Those Wickans were eager for a fight. Defending the market mob had nothing to do with it.'

The mage rubbed his face. 'Best hope the Hissari believe otherwise.'

'Come,' Duiker said, 'let us take wine – I know a place in Imperial Square, and on the way you can tell me how the Seventh has warmed to their new Fist.'

Kulp barked a laugh as they began walking. 'Respect maybe, but no warmth. He's completely changed the drills. We've done one battlefield formation since he arrived, and that was the day he took command.'

Duiker frowned. 'I'd heard that he was working the soldiers to exhaustion, that he didn't even need to enforce the curfew since everyone was so eager for sleep and the barracks were silent as tombs by the eighth bell. If not practising wheels and turtles and shield-walls, then what?'

'The ruined monastery on the hill south of the city – you know the one? Just foundations left except for the central temple, but the chest-high walls cover the entire hilltop like a small city. The sappers have built them up, roofed some of them over. It was a maze of alleys and cul-de-sacs to begin with, but Coltaine had the sappers turn it into a nightmare. I'd wager there's soldiers still wandering around lost in there. The Wickan has us there every afternoon, mock battles, street control, assaulting buildings, break-out tactics, retrieving wounded. Coltaine's warriors act the part of rioting mobs and looters, and I tell you, historian, they were born to it.' He paused for breath. 'Every day... we bake under the sun on that bone-bleached hill, broken down to squad level, each squad assigned impossible objectives.' He grimaced. 'Under this new Fist, each soldier of the Seventh has died a dozen times or more in mock battle. Corporal List has been killed in every exercise so far, the poor boy's Hood-addled, and through it all those Wickan savages hoot and howl.'

Duiker said nothing as they continued on their way to Imperial Square. When they entered the Malazan Quarter, the historian finally spoke. 'Something of a rivalry, then, between the Seventh and the Wickan Regiment.'

'Oh, aye, that tactic's obvious enough, but it's going too far, I think. We'll see in a few days' time, when we start getting Wickan Lancer support. There'll be double-crossing, mark my words.'

They strode into the square. 'And you?' Duiker asked. 'What task has Coltaine given the Seventh's last cadre mage?'

'Folly. I conjure illusions all day until my skull's ready to burst.'

'Illusions? In the mock battles?'

'Aye, and it's what makes the objectives so impossible. Believe me, there's been more than one curse thrown my way, Duiker. More than one.'

'What do you conjure, dragons?'

'I wish. I create Malazan refugees, historian. By the hundred. A thousand weighted scarecrows for the soldiers to drag around aren't sufficient for

Coltaine, the ones he has me create flee the wrong way, or refuse to leave their homes, or drag furniture and other possessions. Coltaine's orders – my refugees create chaos, and so far cost more lives than any other element in the exercises. I'm not a popular man, Duiker.'

'What of Sormo E'nath?' the historian asked, his mouth suddenly dry.

'The warlock? Nowhere to be seen.'

Duiker nodded to himself. He'd already guessed Kulp's answer to that question. *You're busy reading the stones in the sand, Sormo.* Aren't *you? While Coltaine hammers the Seventh into shape as guardians to Malazan refugees.* 'Mage,' he said.

'Aye?'

'Dying a dozen times in mock battle is nothing. When it's for real you die but once. Push the Seventh, Kulp. Any way you can. Show Coltaine what the Seventh's capable of – talk it over with the squad leaders. Tonight. Come tomorrow, win your objectives, and I'll talk to Coltaine about a day of rest. Show him, and he'll give it.'

'What makes you so certain?'

Because time's running out and he needs you. He needs you sharp. 'Win your objectives. Leave the Fist to me.'

'Very well, I'll see what I can do.'

Corporal List died within the first few minutes of the mock engagement. Bult, commanding a howling mob of Wickans rampaging down the ruin's main avenue, had personally clouted the hapless Malazan on the side of his head, hard enough to leave the boy sprawled unconscious in the dust. The veteran warrior had then thrown List over one shoulder and carried him from the battle.

Grinning, Bult jogged up the dusty track to the rise from which the new Fist and a few of his officers observed the engagement, and dropped the corporal into the dust at Coltaine's feet. Duiker sighed.

Coltaine glanced around. 'Healer! Attend the boy!'

One of the Seventh's cutters appeared, crouching at the corporal's side.

Coltaine's slitted eyes found Duiker. 'I see no change in this day's proceedings, Historian.'

'It is early yet, Fist.'

The Wickan grunted, returning his attention to the dust-filled ruins. Soldiers were emerging from the chaos, fighters from the Seventh and Wickans, staggering with minor wounds and broken limbs.

Readying his cudgel, Bult scowled. 'You spoke too soon, Coltaine,' he said. 'This one's different.'

There were, Duiker saw, more Wickans among the victims than soldiers of the Seventh, and the ratio was widening with every passing moment. Somewhere in the chaotic clouds of dust, the tide had turned.

Coltaine called for his horse. He swung himself into the saddle and shot Bult a glare. 'Stay here, Uncle. Where are my Lancers?' He waited impatiently as forty horsemen rode onto the rise. Their lances were blunted with bundled strips of leather. For all that, Duiker knew, anything more than a glancing blow from them was likely to break bones.

Coltaine led them at a canter towards the ruins.

Bult spat dust. 'It's about time,' he said.

'What is?' Duiker asked.

'The Seventh's finally earned Lancer support. It's been a week overdue, Historian. Coltaine had expected a toughening, but all we got was a wilting. Who's given them new spines, then? You? Careful or Coltaine'll make you a captain.'

'As much as I'd like to take credit,' Duiker said, 'this is the work of Kulp and the squad sergeants.'

'Kulp's making things easier, then? No wonder they've turned the battle.'

The historian shook his head. 'Kulp follows Coltaine's orders, Bult. If you're looking for a reason to explain your Wickans' defeat, you'll have to look elsewhere. You might start with the Seventh showing their true mettle.'

'Perhaps I shall,' the veteran mused, a glint in his small dark eyes.

'The Fist called you Uncle.'

'Aye.'

'Well? Are you?'

'Am I what?'

Duiker gave up. He was coming to understand the Wickan sense of humour. No doubt there would be another half a dozen or so brisk exchanges before Bult finally relented with an answer. I *could play it through. Or I could let the bastard wait. . . wait for ever, in fact.*

From the dust clouds a score of refugees appeared, wavering strangely as they walked, each of them burdened with impossible possessions – massive dressers, chests, larder-packed cupboards, candlesticks and antique armour. Flanking the mob in a protective cordon were soldiers of the Seventh, laughing and shouting and beating swords on shields as they made good their withdrawal.

Bult barked a laugh. 'My compliments to Kulp when you see him, Historian.'

'The Seventh's earned a day of rest,' Duiker said.

The Wickan raised his hairless brows. 'For one victory?'

'They need to savour it, Commander. Besides, the healers will be busy enough mending bones – you don't want them with exhausted warrens at the wrong time.'

'And the wrong time is soon, is it?'

'I am sure,' Duiker said slowly, 'Sormo E'nath would agree with me.'

Bult spat again. 'My nephew approaches.'

Coltaine and his Lancers had appeared, providing cover for the soldiers, many of whom dragged or carried the scarecrow refugees. The sheer numbers made it clear that victory for the Seventh had been absolute.

'Is that a smile on Coltaine's face?' Duiker asked. 'Just for a moment, I thought I saw ...'

'Mistaken, no doubt,' Bult growled, but Duiker was coming to know these Wickans, and he detected a hint of humour in the veteran's voice. After a moment Bult continued, 'Take word to the Seventh, Historian. They've earned their day.'

Fiddler sat in darkness. The overgrown garden had closed in around the well and its crescent-shaped stone bench. Above the sapper only a small patch of starlit sky was visible. There was no moon. After a moment he cocked his head. 'You move quietly, lad, I'll give you that.'

Crokus hesitated behind Fiddler, then joined him on the bench. 'Guess you never expected him to pull rank on you like that,' the young man said.

'Is that what it was?'

'That's what it seemed like.'

Fiddler made no reply. The occasional rhizan flitted through the clearing in pursuit of the capemoths hovering above the well-mouth. The cool night air was rank with rotting refuse from beyond the back wall.

'She's upset,' Crokus said.

The sapper shook his head. Upset. 'It was an argument, we weren't torturing prisoners.'

'Apsalar doesn't remember any of that.'

'I do, lad, and those are hard memories to shake.'

'She's just a fishergirl.'

'Most of the time,' Fiddler said. 'But sometimes...' He shook his head.

Crokus sighed, then changed the subject. 'So it wasn't part of the plan, then, Kalam going off on his own?'

'Old blood calls, lad. Kalam's Seven Cities born and raised. Besides, he wants to meet this Sha'ik, this desert witch, the Hand of Dryjhna.'

'Now you're taking his side,' Crokus said in quiet exasperation. 'A tenth of a bell ago you nearly accused him of being a traitor...'

Fiddler grimaced. 'Confusing times for us all. We've been outlawed by Laseen, but does that make us any less soldiers of the Empire? Malaz isn't the Empress and the Empress isn't Malaz—'

'A moot distinction, I'd say.'

The sapper glanced over. 'Would you now? Ask the girl, maybe she'll explain it.'

'But you're expecting the rebellion. In fact, you're counting on it—'

'Don't mean we have to be the ones who trigger the Whirlwind, though, does it? Kalam wants to be at the heart of things. It's always been his way. This time, the chance literally fell into his lap. The Book of Dryjhna holds the heart of the Whirlwind Goddess – to begin the Apocalypse it needs to be opened, by the Seeress and no-one else. Kalam knows it might well be suicidal, but he'll deliver that Hood-cursed book into Sha'ik's hands, and so add another crack in Laseen's crumbling control. Give him credit for insisting on keeping the rest of us out of it.'

'There you go again, defending him. The plan was to assassinate Laseen, not get caught up in this uprising. It still doesn't make any sense coming to this continent—'

Fiddler straightened, eyes on the stars glittering overhead. Desert stars, sharp diamonds that ever seemed eager to draw blood. 'There's more than one road to Unta, lad. We're here to find one that's probably never been used before and may not even work, but we'll look for it anyway, with Kalam or without him. Hood knows, it might be Kalam's taking the wiser path, overland, down to Aren, by mundane ship back to Quon Tali. Maybe

dividing our paths will prove the wisest decision of all, increasing our chances that one of us at least will make it through.'

'Right,' Crokus snapped, 'and if Kalam doesn't make it? You'll go after Laseen yourself? A glorified ditch-digger, and long in the tooth at that. You hardly inspire confidence, Fiddler. We're still supposed to be taking Apsalar home.'

Fiddler's voice was cold. 'Don't push me, lad. A few years pilfering purses on Darujhistan's streets don't qualify you to cast judgement on me.'

Branches thrashed in the tree opposite the two men, and Moby appeared, hanging one-armed, a rhizan struggling its jaws. The familiar's eyes glittered as bones crunched. Fiddler grunted. 'Back in Quon Tali,' he said slowly, 'we'll find more supporters than you might imagine. No-one's indispensable, nor should anyone be dismissed as useless. Like it or not, lad, you've some growing up to do.'

'You think me stupid but you're wrong. You think I'm blind to the fact that you're thinking you've got *another* shaved knuckle in the hole and I don't mean Quick Ben. Kalam's an assassin who just might be good enough to get to Laseen. But if he doesn't, there's another one who just might still have in her the skills of a god – but not any old god, no, the *Patron* of Assassins, the one you call the Rope. So you keep prodding her – you're taking her home because she isn't what she once was, but the truth is, you want *the old one back.'*

Fiddler was silent for a long time, watching Moby eating the rhizan. When it finally swallowed down the last of the winged lizard, the sapper cleared his throat. 'I don't think that deep,' he said. 'I run on instinct.'

'Are you telling me that using Apsalar didn't occur to you?'

'Not to me, no ...'

'But Kalam ...'

Fiddler resisted, then shrugged. 'If he didn't think of it, Quick Ben would have.'

Crokus's hiss was triumphant. 'I knew it. I'm no fool—'

'Oh, Hood's breath, lad, that you're not.'

'I won't let it happen, Fiddler.'

'This bhok'aral of your uncle's,' the sapper said, nodding at Moby, 'it's truly a familiar, a servant to a sorcerer? But if Mammot is dead, why is it still here? I'm no mage, but I thought such familiars were magically ... fused to their masters.'

'I don't know,' Crokus admitted, his tone retaining an edge that told Fiddler the lad was entirely aware of the sapper's line of thinking. 'Maybe he's just a pet. You'd better pray it's so. I said I wouldn't let you use Apsalar. If Moby's a true familiar, it won't just be me you'll have to get past.'

'I won't be trying anything, Crokus,' Fiddler said. 'But I still say you've some growing up to do. Sooner or later it will occur to you that you can't speak for Apsalar. She'll do what she decides, like it or not. The possession may be over, but the god's skills remain in her bones.' He slowly turned and faced the boy. 'What if she decides to put those skills to use?'

'She won't,' Crokus said, but the assurance was gone from his voice. He gestured and Moby flapped sloppily into his arms. 'What did you call him – a bhoka ... ?'

'Bhok'aral. They're native to this land.'

'Oh.'

'Get some sleep, lad, we're leaving tomorrow.'

'So is Kalam.'

'Aye, but we won't be in each other's company. Parallel paths southward, at least to start with.'

He watched Crokus head back inside, Moby clinging to the lad like a child. Hood's *breath, I'm not looking forward-to this journey.*

A hundred paces inside the Caravan Gate was a square in which the land traders assembled before leaving Ehrlitan. Most would strike south along the raised coastal road, following the line of the bay. Villages and outposts were numerous on this route, and the Malazan-built cobble road itself was well patrolled, or, rather, would have been had not the city's Fist recalled the garrisons.

As far as Fiddler could learn in speaking with various merchants and caravan guards, few bandits had yet to take advantage of the troop withdrawal, but from the swollen ranks among the mercenary guards accompanying each caravan, it was clear to the sapper that the merchants were taking no chances.

It would have been fruitless for the three Malazans to disguise themselves as merchants on their journey south; they had neither the coin nor the equipment to carry out such a masquerade. With travel between cities as risky as it now was, they had chosen to travel in the guise of pilgrims. To the most devout, the Path of the Seven – pilgrimage to each of the seven Holy Cities – was a respected display of faith. Pilgrimage was at the heart of this land's tradition, impervious to the threat of bandits, or war.

Fiddler retained his Gral disguise, playing the role of guardian and guide to Crokus and Apsalar – two young, newly married believers embarking on a journey that would bless their union under the Seven Heavens. Each would be mounted, Fiddler on a Gral-bred horse disdainful of the sapper's imposture and viciously tempered, Crokus and Apsalar on well-bred mounts purchased from one of the better stables outside Ehrlitan. Three spare horses and four mules completed the train.

Kalam had left with the dawn, offering Fiddler and the others only a terse farewell. The words that had been exchanged the night before sullied the moment of departure. The sapper understood Kalam's hunger to wound Laseen through the blood spilled by rebellion, but the potential damage to the Empire – and to whoever assumed the throne following Laseen's fall – was, to Fiddler's mind, too great a risk. They'd clashed hard, then, and Fiddler was left feeling nicked and blunted by the exchange.

There was pathos in that parting, Fiddler belatedly realized, for it seemed that the duty that once bound him and Kalam together, to a single cause which was as much friendship as anything else, had been sundered. And for the moment, at least, there was nothing to take its place within Fiddler. He was left feeling lost, more alone than he had been in years.

They would be among the last of the trains to leave through Caravan Gate. As Fiddler checked the girth straps on the mules one final time, the sound of galloping horses drew his attention.

A troop of six Red Blades had arrived, slowing their mounts as they entered the square. Fiddler glanced over to where Crokus and Apsalar stood beside their horses. Catching the lad's eye, he shook his head, resumed adjusting the mule's girth strap.

The soldiers were looking for someone. The troop split, a rider each heading for one of the remaining trains. Fiddler heard hoofs clumping on cobbles behind him, forced himself to remain calm.

'Gral!'

Pausing to spit as a tribesman would at the accosting of a Malazan lapdog, he slowly turned.

Beneath the helm's rim, the Red Blade's dark face had tightened in response to the gesture. 'One day the Red Blades will cleanse the hills of Gral,' he promised, his smile revealing dull grey teeth.

Fiddler's only reply was a snort. 'If you have something worthy of being said, Red Blade, speak. Our shadows are already too short for the leagues we travel this day.'

'A measure of your incompetence, Gral. I have but one question to ask. Answer truthfully, for I shall know if you lie. We would know if a man on a roan stallion rode out alone this morning, through Caravan Gate.'

'I saw no such man,' Fiddler replied, 'but I now wish him well. May the Seven Spirits guard him for all his days.'

The Red Blade snarled. 'I warn you, your blood is no armour against me, Gral. You were here with the dawn?'

Fiddler returned to the mules. 'One question,' he grated. 'You pay for more with coin, Red Blade.'

The soldier spat at Fiddler's feet, jerked his mount's head around and rode to rejoin the troop.

Beneath his desert veil, Fiddler allowed himself a thin smile. Crokus appeared beside him.

'What was that about?' he demanded in a hiss.

The sapper shrugged. 'The Red Blades are hunting someone. Not anything to do with us. Get back to your horse, lad. We're leaving.'

'Kalam?'

His forearms resting on the mule's back, Fiddler hesitated, squinting against the glare bouncing from the bleached cobbles. 'It may have reached them that the holy tome's no longer in Aren. And someone's delivering it to Sha'ik. No-one knows Kalam is here.'

Crokus looked unconvinced. 'He met someone last night, Fiddler.'

'An old contact who owes him.'

'Giving him reason to betray Kalam. No-one likes being reminded of debts.'

Fiddler said nothing. After a moment he patted the mule's back, raising a faint puff of dust, then went to his horse. The Gral gelding showed its teeth as he reached for the reins. He gripped the bridle under the animal's chin. It tried tossing its head but he held firm, leaned close. 'Show some manners, you ugly bastard, or you'll live to regret it.' Gathering the reins, he pulled himself up into the high-backed saddle.

Beyond Caravan Gate the coastal road stretched southward, level despite the gentle rise and fall of the sandstone cliffs that overlooked the bay on the west side. On their left and a league inland ran the Arifal Hills. The jagged

serrations of Arifal would follow them all the way to the Eb River, thirty-six leagues to the south. Barely tamed tribes dwelt in those hills, pre-eminent among them the Gral. Fiddler's greatest worry was running into a real Gral tribesman. The chance of that was diminished somewhat given the season, for the Gral would be driving their goats deep into the range, where both shade and water could be found.

They nudged their mounts into a canter and rode past a merchant's train to avoid the trailing dust clouds, then Fiddler settled them back into a slow trot. The day's heat was already building. Their destination was a small village called Salik, a little over eight leagues distant, where they would stop to eat the midday meal and wait out the hottest hours before continuing on to the Trob River.

If all went well, they would reach G'danisban in a week's time. Fiddler expected Kalam to be two, maybe even three days ahead of them by then. Beyond G'danisban was the Pan'potsun Odhan, a sparsely populated wasteland of desiccated hills, the skeletal ruins of long-dead cities, poisonous snakes, biting flies and – he recalled the Spiritwalker Kimloc's words – the potential of something far deadlier. A *convergence. Togg's feet, I don't like that thought at all.* He thought about the conch shell in his leather pack. Carrying an item of power was never a wise thing. *Probably more trouble than it's worth. What if some Soletaken sniffs it out, decides it wants it for its collection?* He scowled. A *collection easily built on with one conch shell and three shiny skulls.*

The more he thought on it, the more uneasy he became. *Better to sell it to some merchant in G'danisban. The extra coin could prove useful.* The thought settled him. He would sell the conch, be rid of it. While no-one would deny a Spiritwalker's power, it was likely dangerous to lean too heavily on it. The Tano priests gave up their lives in the name of peace. *Or worse. Kimloc surrendered his honour. Better to rely on the Moranth incendiaries in my pack than on any mysterious shell. A Flamer will bum a Soletaken as easily as anyone else.*

Crokus rode up alongside the sapper. 'What are you thinking, Fiddler?'

'Nothing. Where's that bhok'aral of yours?'

The young man frowned. 'I don't know. I guess he was just a pet after all. Went off last night and never came back.' He wiped the back of his hand across his face and Fiddler saw smeared tears on his cheeks. 'I sort of felt Mammot was with me, with Moby.'

'Was your uncle a good man, before the Jaghut Tyrant took him?'

Crokus nodded.

Fiddler grunted. 'Then he's with you still. Moby probably sniffed kin in the air. More than a few highborn keep bhok'arala as pets in the city. Just a pet after all.'

'I suppose you're right. For most of my life I thought of Mammot as just a scholar, an old man always scribbling on scrolls. My uncle. But then I found out he was a High Priest. Important, with powerful friends like Baruk. But before I could even come to terms with that, he was dead. Destroyed by your squad—'

'Hold on there, lad! What we killed wasn't your uncle. Not any more.'

'I know. In killing him you saved Darujhistan. I know, Fiddler...'

'It's done, Crokus. And you should realize, an uncle who took care of you and loved you is more important than his being a High Priest. And he would have told you the same, I imagine, if he'd had the chance.'

'But don't you see? He had *power*, Fiddler, but he didn't do a damn thing with it! Just hid in his tiny room in a crumbling tenement! He could have owned an estate, sat on the Council, made a difference ...'

Fiddler wasn't ready to take on that argument. He'd never had any skill with counsel. *Got no advice worth giving anyway.* 'Did she kick you up here for being so moody, lad?'

Crokus's face darkened, then he spurred forward, taking point position.

Sighing, Fiddler twisted in the saddle and eyed Apsalar, riding a few paces behind. 'Lovers' spat, is it?'

She blinked owlishly.

Fiddler swung back, settling in the saddle. 'Hood's balls,' he muttered under his breath.

Iskaral Pust poked the broom farther up the chimney and frantically scrubbed. Black clouds descended onto the hearthstone and settled on the High Priest's grey robes.

'You have wood?' Mappo asked from the raised stone platform he had been using as a bed and was now sitting on.

Iskaral paused. 'Wood? Wood's better than a broom?'

'For a fire,' the Trell said. 'To take out the chill of this chamber.'

'Wood! No, of course not. But dung, oh yes, plenty of dung. A fire! Excellent. Burn them into a crisp! Are Trell known for cunning? No recollection of that, none among the rare mention of Trell this, Trell that. Finding writings on an illiterate people very difficult. Hmm.'

'Trell are quite literate,' Mappo said. 'Have been for some time. Seven, eight centuries, in fact.'

'Must update my library, an expensive proposition. Raising shadows to pillage great libraries of the world.' He squatted down at the fireplace, frowning through the soot covering his face.

Mappo cleared his throat. 'Burn what into a crisp, High Priest?'

'Spiders, of course. This temple is rotten with spiders. Kill them on sight, Trell. Use those thick-soled feet, those leathery hands. Kill them all, do you understand?'

Nodding, Mappo pulled the fur blanket closer around him, wincing only slightly as the hide brushed the puckered wounds on the back of his neck. The fever had broken, as much due to his own reserves as, he suspected, the dubious medicines applied by Iskaral's silent servant. The fangs and claws of D'ivers and Soletaken bred a singularly virulent sickness, often culminating in hallucinations, bestial madness, then death. For many who survived, the madness remained, reappearing on a regular basis for one or

two nights nine or ten times each year. It was a madness often characterized by murder.

Iskaral Pust believed Mappo had escaped that fate, but the Trell would not himself be confident of that until at least two cycles of the moon had passed without sign of any symptoms. He did not like to think what he would be capable of when gripped in a murderous rage. Many years ago among the warband ravaging the Jhag Odhan, Mappo had willed himself into such a state, as warriors often did, and his memories of the deaths he delivered remained with him and always would.

If the Soletaken's poison was alive within him, Mappo would take his own life rather than unleash its will.

Iskaral Pust stabbed the broom into each corner of the small mendicant's chamber that was the Trell's quarters, then reached up to the ceiling corners to do the same. 'Kill what bites, kill what stings, this sacred precinct of Shadow must be pristine! Kill all that slithers, all that scuttles. You were examined for vermin, the both of you, oh yes. No unwelcome visitors permitted. Lye baths were prepared, but nothing on either of you. I remain suspicious, of course.'

'Have you resided here long, High Priest?'

'No idea. Irrelevant. Importance lies solely in the deeds done, the goals achieved. Time is preparation, nothing more. One prepares for as long as is required. To do this is to accept that planning begins at birth. You are born and before all else you are plunged into shadow, wrapped inside the holy ambivalence, there to suckle sweet sustenance. I live to prepare, Trell, and the preparations are nearly complete.'

'Where is Icarium?'

'A life given for a life taken, tell him that. In the library. The nuns left but a handful of books. Tomes devoted to pleasuring themselves. Best read in bed, I find. The rest of the material is mine, a scant collection, dreadful paucity, I am embarrassed. Hungry?'

Mappo shook himself. The High Priest's rambles had a hypnotic quality. Each question the Trell voiced was answered with a bizarre rambling monologue that seemed to drain him of will beyond the utterance of yet another question. True to his assertions, Iskaral Pust could make the passing of time meaningless. 'Hungry? Aye.'

'Servant prepares food.'

'Can he bring it to the library?'

The High Priest scowled. 'Collapse of etiquette. But if you insist.'

The Trell pushed himself upright. 'Where is the library?'

'Turn right, proceed thirty-four paces, turn right again, twelve paces, then through door on the right, thirty-five paces, through archway on right another eleven paces, turn right one last time, fifteen paces, enter the door on the right.'

Mappo stared at Iskaral Pust.

The High Priest shifted nervously.

'Or,' the Trell said, eyes narrowed, 'turn left, nineteen paces.'

'Aye,' Iskaral muttered.

Mappo strode to the door. 'I shall take the short route, then.'

'If you must,' the High Priest growled as he bent to close examination of the broom's ragged end.

The breach of etiquette was explained when, upon entering the library, Mappo saw that the squat chamber also served as kitchen. Icarium sat at a robust black-stained table a few paces to the Trell's right, while Servant hunched over a cauldron suspended by chain over a hearth a pace to Mappo's left. Servant's head was almost invisible inside a cloud of steam, drenched in condensation and dripping into the cauldron as he worked a wooden ladle in slow, turgid circles.

'I shall pass on the soup, I think,' Mappo said to the man.

'These books are rotting,' Icarium said, leaning back and eyeing Mappo. 'You are recovered?'

'So it seems.'

Still studying the Trell, Icarium frowned. 'Soup? Ah,' his expression cleared, 'not soup. Laundry. You'll find more palatable fare on the carving table.' He gestured to the wall behind Servant, then returned to the mouldering pages of an ancient book opened before him. 'This is astonishing, Mappo...'

'Given how isolated those nuns were,' Mappo said as he approached the carving table, 'I'm surprised you're astonished.'

'Not those books, friend. Iskaral's own. There are works here whose existence was but the faintest rumour. And some – like this one – that I have never heard of before. A Treatise *on Irrigation Planning in the* Fifth *Millennium of Ararkal,* by no fewer than four authors.'

Returning to the library table with a pewter plate piled high with bread and cheese, Mappo leant over his friend's shoulder to examine the detailed drawings on the book's vellum pages, then the strange, braided script. The Trell grunted. Mouth suddenly dry, he managed to mutter, 'What is so astonishing about that?'

Icarium leaned back. 'The sheer ... frivolity, Mappo. The materials alone for this tome are a craftsman's annual wage. No scholar in their right mind would waste such resources – never mind their time – on such a pointless, trite subject. And this is not the only example. Look, *Seed Dispersal Patterns of the Purille Flower on the Skar Archipelago,* and here, *Diseases of White' Rimmed* Clams *of Lekoor Bay.* And I am convinced that these works are thousands of years old. Thousands.'

And in a language I never knew you would recognize, much less understand. He recalled when he'd last seen such a script, beneath a hide canopy on a hill that marked his tribe's northernmost border. He'd been

among a handful of guards escorting the tribe's elders to what would prove a fateful summons.

Autumn rains drumming overhead, they had squatted in a half-circle, facing north, and watched as seven robed and hooded figures approached. Each held a staff, and as they strode beneath the canopy and stood in silence before the elders, Mappo saw, with a shiver, how those staves seemed to writhe before his eyes, the wood like serpentine roots, or perhaps those parasitic trees that entwined the boles of others, choking the life from them. Then he realized that the twisted madness of the shafts was in fact runic etching, ever changing, as if unseen hands continually carved words anew with every breath's span.

Then one among them withdrew its hood, and so began the moment that would change Mappo's future path. His thoughts jerked away from the memory.

Trembling, the Trell sat down, clearing a space for his plate. 'Is all this important, Icarium?'

'Significant, Mappo. The civilization that brought forth these works must have been appallingly rich. The language is clearly related to modern Seven Cities dialects, although in some ways more sophisticated. And see this symbol, here in the spine of each such tome? A twisted staff. I have seen that symbol before, friend. I am certain of it.'

'Rich, you said?' The Trell struggled to drag the conversation away from what he knew to be a looming precipice. 'More like mired in minutiae. Probably explains why it's dust and ashes. Arguing over seeds in the wind while barbarians batter down the gates. Indolence takes many forms, but it comes to every civilization that has outlived its will. You know that as well as I. In this case it was an indolence characterized by a pursuit of knowledge, a frenzied search for answers to everything, no matter the value of such answers. A civilization can as easily drown in what it knows as in what it doesn't know. Consider,' he continued, *'Gothos's Folly.* Gothos's curse was in being too aware – of everything. Every permutation, every potential. Enough to poison every scan he cast on the world. It availed him naught, and worse, he was aware of even that.'

'You must be feeling better,' Icarium said wryly. 'Your pessimism has revived. In any case, these works support my belief that the many ruins in Raraku and the Pan'potsun Odhan are evidence that a thriving civilization once existed here. Indeed, perhaps the first true human civilization, from which all others were born.'

Leave this path of thought, *Icarium. Leave it now.* 'And how does this knowledge avail us in our present situation?'

Icarium's expression soured slightly. 'My obsession with time, of course. Writing replaces memory, you see, and the language itself changes because of it. Think of my mechanisms, in which I seek to measure the passage of hours, days, years. Such measurings are by nature cyclic, repetitive. Words and sentences once possessed the same rhythms, and could thus be locked into one's mind and later recalled with absolute precision. Perhaps,' he mused after a moment, 'if I was illiterate I would not be so forgetful.' He sighed, forced a smile. 'Besides, I was but passing time, Mappo.'

The Trell tapped one blunt, wrinkled finger on the open book. 'I imagine the authors of this would have defended their efforts with the same words, friend. I have a more pressing concern.'

The Jhag's expression was cool, not completely masking amusement. 'And that is?'

Mappo gestured. 'This place. Shadow does not list among my favourite cults. Nest of assassins and worse. Illusion and deceit and betrayal. Iskaral Pust affects a harmless façade, but I am not fooled. He was clearly expecting us, and anticipates our involvement in whatever schemes he plans. We risk much in lingering here.'

'But Mappo,' Icarium said slowly, 'it is precisely here, in this place, that my goal shall be achieved.'

The Trell winced. 'I feared you would say that. Now you shall have to explain it to me.'

'I cannot, friend. Not yet. What I hold are suspicions, nothing more. When I am certain, I shall feel confident enough to explain. Can you be patient

with me?'

In his mind's eye he saw another face, this one human, thin and pale, raindrops tracking runnels down the withered cheeks. Flat, grey eyes reaching up, finding Mappo's own beyond the rim of elders. 'Do you know us?' The voice was a rasp of rough leather.

An elder had nodded. 'We know you as the Nameless Ones.'

'It is well,' the man replied, eyes still fixed on Mappo's own. 'The Nameless Ones, who think not in years, but in centuries. Chosen warrior,' he continued, addressing Mappo, 'what can you learn of patience?'

Like rooks bursting from a copse, the memories fled. Staring at Icarium, Mappo managed a smile, revealing his gleaming canines. 'Patient? I can be nothing else with you. Nonetheless, I do not trust Iskaral Pust.'

Servant began removing sopping clothes and bedding from the cauldron, using his bare hands as he squeezed steaming water from the bundles. Watching him, the Trell frowned. One of Servant's arms was strangely pink, unweathered, almost youthful. The other more befitted the man's evident age, thickly muscled, hairy and tanned.

'Servant?'

The man did not look up.

'Can you speak?' Mappo continued.

'It seems,' Icarium said when Servant made no response, 'that he's turned a deaf ear to us, by his Master's command, I'd warrant. Shall we explore this temple, Mappo? Bearing in mind that every shadow is likely to echo our words as a whisper in the High Priest's ears.'

'Well,' the Trell growled as he rose, 'it is of little concern to me that Iskaral knows of my distrust.'

'He surely knows more of us than we do of him,' Icarium said, also rising.

As they left, Servant was still twisting water from the cloth with something like savage joy, the veins thick on his massive forearms.

CHAPTER FOUR

In a land where
Seven cities rose in gold,
Even the dust has eyes

Debrahl Saying

A crowd of dusty, sweat-smeared men gathered around as the last of the bodies were removed. The dust cloud hung unmoving over the mine entrance as it had for most of the morning, since the collapse of the reach at the far end of Deep Mine. Under Beneth's command the slaves had worked frantically to retrieve the thirty-odd companions buried in the fall.

None had survived. Expressionless, Felisin watched with a dozen other slaves from the rest ramp at Twistings Mouth while they awaited the arrival of refilled water casks. The heat had turned even the deepest reaches of the mines into sweltering, dripping ovens. Slaves were collapsing by the score every hour below ground.

On the other side of the pit, Heboric tilled the parched earth of Deepsoil. It was his second week there and the cleaner air and the relief from pulling stone carts had improved his health. A shipment of limes delivered at Beneth's command had helped as well.

Had she not seen to his transfer, Heboric would now be dead, his body crushed under tons of rock. He owed her his life.

The realization brought Felisin little satisfaction. They rarely spoke to each other any more. Head clouded with durhang smoke, it was all Felisin could do to drag herself home from Bula's each night. She slept long hours but gained no rest. The days working in Twistings passed in a long, numb haze. Even Beneth had complained that her lovemaking had become ... torpid.

The thuds and grunts of the water carts on the pitted work road grew louder, but Felisin could not pull her gaze from the rescuers as they laid out the mangled corpses to await the body wagon. A faint residue of pity clung to what she could see of the scene, but even that seemed too much of an effort, never mind pulling away her eyes.

For all her dulled responses, she went to Beneth, wanting to be used, more and more often. She sought him out when he was drunk, weaving and generous, when he offered her to his friends, to Bula and to other women.

You're numb, girl, Heboric had said one of the few times he'd addressed her. *Yet your thirst for feeling grows, until even pain will do. But you're looking in the wrong places.*

Wrong places. What did he know of wrong places? The far reach of Deep Mine was a wrong place. The Shaft, where the bodies would be dumped, that was a wrong place. *Everywhere else is just a shade of good enough.*

She was ready to move in with Beneth, punctuating the choices she'd made. In a few days, perhaps. Next week. Soon. She'd made such an issue of her own independence, but it was proving not so great a task to surrender it after all.

'Lass.'

Blinking, Felisin looked up. It was the young Malazan guard, the one who'd warned Beneth once ... *long ago.*

The soldier grinned. 'Find the quote yet?'

'What?'

'From Kellanved's writings, girl.' The boy was frowning now. 'I suggested you find someone who knew the rest of the passage I quoted.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

He reached down, the calluses ridging the index finger and thumb of his sword hand scraping her chin and jawline as he raised her face. She winced in the bright light when he pushed her hair back. 'Durhang,' he whispered.

'Queen's heart, girl, you look ten years older than the last time I saw you, and when was that? Two weeks back.'

'Ask Beneth,' she mumbled, pulling her head away from his touch.

'Ask him what?'

'For me. In your bed. He'll say yes, but only if he's drunk. He'll be drunk tonight. He grieves for the dead with a jug. Or two. Touch me then.'

He straightened. 'Where's Heboric?'

'Heboric? Deepsoil.' She thought to ask why he wanted him instead of her, but the question drifted away. He could touch her tonight. She'd grown to like calluses.

Beneth was paying Captain Sawark a visit and he'd decided to take her with him. He was looking to make a deal, Felisin belatedly realized, and he'd offer her to the captain as an incentive.

They approached Rathole Round from Work Road, passing Bula's Inn where half a dozen off-duty Dosii guards lounged around the front door, their bored gazes tracking them.

'Walk a straight line, lass,' Beneth grumbled, taking her arm. 'And stop dragging your feet. It's what you like, isn't it? Always wanting more.'

An undercurrent of disgust had come to his tone when he spoke to her. He'd stopped making promises. *I'll make you my own, girl. Move in with me. We won't need anyone else.* Those gruff, whispered assurances had vanished. The realization did not bother Felisin. She'd never really believed Beneth anyway.

Directly ahead, Sawark's Keep rose squat from the centre of Rathole Round, its huge, rough-cut blocks of stone stained from the greasy smoke that never really left Skullcup. A lone guard stood outside the entrance, a pike held loosely in one hand. 'Hard luck,' he said once they were near.

'What is?' Beneth demanded.

The soldier shrugged. 'This morning's cave-in, what else?'

'We might've saved some,' Beneth said, 'if Sawark had sent us some help.'

'Saved some? What's the point? Sawark's not in the mood if you've come here to complain.' The man's flat eyes flicked to Felisin. 'If you're here with a gift, that would be another matter.' The guard opened the heavy door. 'He's in the office.'

Beneth grunted. Tugging at Felisin's arm, he dragged her through the portal. The ground floor was an armoury, weapons lining the walls in locked racks. A table and three chairs were off to one side, the leavings of the guards' breakfast crowding the small tabletop. Up from the room's centre rose an iron staircase.

They ascended a single flight to Sawark's office. The captain sat behind a desk that seemed cobbled together from driftwood. His chair was plushly padded with a high back. A large, leather-bound tally book was opened before him. Sawark set down his quill and leaned back.

Felisin could not recall ever having seen the captain before. He made a point of remaining aloof, isolated here within his tower. The man was thin, devoid of fat, the muscles on his bared forearms like twisted cables under pale skin. Against the present fashion, he was bearded, the wiry black ringlets oiled and scented. The hair on his head was cut short. Watery green eyes glittered from a permanent squint above high cheekbones. His wide mouth was bracketed in deep downturned lines. He stared steadily at Beneth, ignoring Felisin as if she was not there.

Beneth pushed her down in a chair close to one wall, on Sawark's left, then sat himself down in the lone chair directly facing the captain. 'Ugly rumours, Sawark. Want to hear them?'

The captain's voice was soft. 'What will that cost me?'

'Nothing. These are free.'

'Go on, then.'

'The Dosii are talking loud at Bula's. Promising the Whirlwind.'

Sawark scowled. 'More of that nonsense. No wonder you give me this news free, Beneth, it's worthless.'

'So I too thought at the beginning, but—'

'What else have you to tell me?'

Beneth's eyes dropped to the ledger on the desk. 'You've tallied this morning's dead? Did you find the name you sought?'

'I sought no particular name, Beneth. You think you've guessed something, but there's nothing there. I'm losing patience.'

'There were four mages among the victims—'

'Enough! Why are you here?'

Beneth shrugged, as if tossing away whatever suspicions he held. 'A gift,' he said, gesturing to Felisin. 'Very young. Docile, but ever eager. No spirit to resist – do whatever you want, Sawark.'

The captain's scowl darkened.

'In exchange,' Beneth continued, 'I wish the answer to a single question. The slave Baudin was arrested this morning – why?'

Felisin blinked. Baudin? She shook her head, trying to clear it of the fog that marked her waking hours. Was this important?

'Arrested in Whipcord Lane after curfew. He got away but one of my men recognized him and so the arrest was effected this morning.' Sawark's watery gaze finally swung to Felisin. 'Very young, you said? Eighteen, nineteen? You're getting old, Beneth, if you call that very young.'

She felt his eyes exploring her like ghost hands. This time, the sensation was anything but pleasing. She fought back a shiver.

'She's fifteen, Sawark. But experienced. Arrived but two transports ago.'

The captain's eyes sharpened on her, and she watched, wondering, as all the blood drained from his face.

Beneth surged to his feet. 'I'll send another. Two young girls from the last shipment.' He stepped close to Felisin and pulled her upright. 'I guarantee your satisfaction, Captain. They'll be here within the hour—'

'Beneth.' Sawark's voice was soft. 'Baudin works for you, does he not?'

'An acquaintance, Sawark. Not one of my trusted ones. I asked because he's on my reach crew. One less strong man will slow us if you're still holding him tomorrow.'

'Live with it, Beneth.'

Neither one believes the other. The thought was like a glimmer of long-lost awareness in Felisin. She drew a deep breath. *Something's happening. I need to think about it. I need to be listening. Listening, right now.*

In answer to Sawark's suggestion, Beneth sighed heavily. 'I shall have to do just that, then. Until later, Captain.'

Felisin did not resist as Beneth propelled her towards the stairs. Once outside he pulled her across the Round, not answering the Keep guard as the man said something in a sneering tone. Breathing hard, Beneth dragged her into the shadows of an alley, then swung her around.

His voice was a harsh rasp. 'Who are you, girl, his long-lost daughter? Hood's breath! Clear your wits! Tell me what happened just now in that office! Baudin? What's Baudin to you? Answer me!'

'He's – he's nothing—'

The back of his hand when it struck her face was like a sack of rocks. Light exploded behind Felisin's eyes as she sprawled sideways. Blood streamed from her nose as she lay unmoving in the alley's rotting refuse. Staring dumbly at the ground six inches away, she watched the red pool spread in the dust.

Beneth dragged her upright and threw her up against a wood-slatted wall. 'Your full name, lass. Tell me!'

'Felisin,' she mumbled. 'Just that—'

Snarling, he raised his hand again.

She stared at the marks her teeth had left just above the knuckles. 'No! I swear it! I was a foundling—'

Disbelief crazed his eyes. 'A what?'

'Found outside the Fener Monastery on Malaz Island – the Empress made accusations – followers of Fener. Heboric—'

'Your ship came from Unta, lass. What do you take me for? You're noble-born—'

'No! Only well cared for. Please, Beneth, I'm not lying. I don't understand Sawark. Maybe Baudin spun a tale, a lie to save his own skin—'

'Your ship sailed from Unta. You've never even been to Malaz Island. This monastery, near which city?'

'Jakata. There's only two cities on the island. The other's Malaz City, I was sent there for a summer. Schooling. I was in training to be a priestess. Ask Heboric, Beneth. Please.'

'Name me the poorest quarter of Malaz City.'

'Poorest?'

'Name it!'

'I don't know! The Fener Temple is in Dockfront! Is it the poorest? There were slums outside the city, lining the Jakata Road. I was there for but a season, Beneth! And I hardly saw Jakata – we weren't allowed! Please, Beneth, I don't understand any of this! Why are you hurting me? I've done everything you wanted me to do – I slept with your friends, I let you trade me, I made myself *valuable*—'

He struck her again, no longer seeking answers or a way through her frantic lies – a new reason had appeared in his eyes, birthing a bright rage. He beat her systematically, in silent, cold fury. After the first few blows, Felisin curled herself tight around the pain, the shadow-cooled alley dust feeling like a balm where her flesh lay upon it. She struggled to concentrate

on her breathing, closing in on that one task, drawing the air in, fighting the waves of agony that came with the effort, then releasing it slowly, a steady stream that carried the pain away.

Eventually she realized that Beneth had stopped, that perhaps he'd only struck her a few times, and that he had left. She was alone in the alley, the thin strip of sky overhead darkening with dusk. She heard occasional voices in the street beyond, but no-one approached the narrow aisle she huddled in.

She woke again later. Apparently she had passed out while crawling towards the alley mouth. The torchlit Work Road was a dozen paces away. Figures ran through her line of sight. Through the constant ringing in her ears, she heard shouts and screams. The air stank of smoke. She thought to resume crawling, then consciousness slipped away again.

Cool cloth brushed her brow. Felisin opened her eyes.

Heboric was bending over her and seemed to be studying her pupils, each in turn. 'You with us, lass?'

Her jaw ached, her lips were crusted together with scabs. She nodded, only now realizing that she was lying in her own bed.

'I'm going to rub some oil on your lips, see if we can prise them open without it hurting too much. You need water.'

She nodded again, and steeled herself against the pain of his ministrations as he dabbed at her mouth with the oil-soaked cloth strapped onto the stub of his left arm. He spoke as he worked. 'Eventful night for us all. Baudin escaped the gaol, lighting a few buildings to flame for diversion. He's hiding somewhere here in Skullcup. No-one tried the cliff walls or Sinker Lake – the cordon of guards lining Beetle Road up top reported no attempts to breach, in any case. Sawark's posted a reward – wants the bastard alive, not least because Baudin went and killed three of his men. I suspect there's more to the tale, what do you think? Then Beneth reports you missing from the Twistings work line this morning, starts me wondering. So I go to talk to him at the midday break – says he last saw you at Bula's last night, says he's cut you loose because you're all used up, sucking more smoke into your lungs than air, as if he ain't to blame for that. But all the while he's talking,

I'm studying those cut marks on his knuckles. Beneth was in a fight last night, I see, and the only damage he's sporting is what was done by somebody's teeth. Well, the weeding's done and nobody's keeping an eye on old Heboric, so I spend the afternoon looking, checking alleys, expecting the worst I admit—'

Felisin pushed his arm away. Slowly she opened her mouth, wincing at the pain and feeling the cool prick of reopened gashes. 'Beneth,' she managed. Her chest hurt with every breath.

Heboric's eyes were hard. 'What of him?'

'Tell him ... from me ... tell him I'm ... sorry.'

The old man slowly leaned back.

'I want him ... to take me back. Tell him. Please.'

Heboric rose. 'Get some rest,' he said in a strangely flat voice as he moved out of her line of sight.

'Water.'

'Coming up, then you sleep.'

'Can't,' she said.

'Why not?'

'Can't sleep ... without a pipe. Can't.'

She sensed him staring at her. 'Your lungs are bruised. You've some cracked ribs. Will tea do? Durhang tea.'

'Make it strong.'

Hearing him fill a cup of water from the cask, she closed her eyes.

'Clever story, lass,' Heboric said. 'A foundling. Lucky for you I'm quick. I'd say there's a good chance Beneth believes you now.'

'Why? Why do you tell me this?'

'To put you at ease. I guess what I mean is –' he approached with the cup of water between his forearms '- he just might take you back, lass.'

'Oh. I... I don't understand you, Heboric'

He watched her raise the clay cup to her lips. 'No,' he said, 'you do not.'

Like an enormous wall, the sandstorm descended down the west slope of the Estara Hills and approached the coastal road with a deathly moan. While such inland storms were rare on the peninsula, Kalam had faced their wrath before. His first task was to leave the road. It ran too close to the sea cliff in places, and such cliffs were known to collapse.

The stallion complained as he angled him down the road's scree bank. For a thick-muscled, vicious beast, the horse was overfond of comforts. The sands were hot, the footing treacherous with hidden sinkholes. Ignoring the stallion's neck tugs and head-tossing, he drove him down and onto the basin, then kicked the animal into a canter.

A league and a half ahead was Ladro Landing, and beyond that, on the banks of a seasonal river, Ladro Keep. Kalam did not plan on staying there if he could help it. The Keep's commander was Malazan, and so too were his guards. If he could, the assassin would outrun the worst of the storm, hoping to regain the coastal road beyond the Keep, then continue on south to the village of Intesarm.

Keening, the ochre wall drew the horizon on Kalam's left ever closer. The hills had vanished. A turgid gloom curtained the sky. The flap and skitter of fleeing rhizan surrounded him. Hissing a curse, the assassin spurred the stallion into a gallop.

As much as he detested horses in principle, the animal was magnificent when in full stride, seeming to flow effortlessly over the ground with a rhythm forgiving of Kalam's modest skills. He would come no closer to admitting a growing affection towards the stallion.

As he rode, he glanced to see the edge of the storm less than a hundred paces away. There would be no outrunning it. A swirling breaker of

whipped sand marked where the wind met the ground. Kalam saw fist-sized rocks in that rolling surf. The wall would crash over them within minutes. Its roar filled the air.

Slightly ahead and on a course that would intercept them, Kalam saw within the ochre cloud a grey stain. He threw himself back in the saddle, sawing the reins. The stallion shrilled, broken out of his rhythm, slewing with his hooves as he stumbled to a stop.

'You'd thank me if you had half a brain,' Kalam snarled. The grey stain was a swarm of chigger fleas. The voracious insects waited for storms like this one, then rode the winds in search of prey. The worst of it was, one could not see them straight on; only from the side were they visible.

As the swarm swept past ahead of them, the storm struck.

The stallion staggered when the wall rolled over them. The world vanished inside a shrieking, whirling ochre haze. Stones and gravel pelted them, drawing flinches from the stallion and grunts of pain from Kalam. The assassin ducked his hooded head and leaned into the wind. Through the slit in his telaba scarf, he squinted ahead, nudging his mount forward at a walk. He leaned down over the animal's neck, reached out one gloved hand and cupped it over the stallion's left eye to shield it from flying stones and grit. For being out here, the assassin owed him that much.

They continued on for another ten minutes, seeing nothing through the cloak of flying sand. Then the stallion snorted, rearing. Snapping and crunching sounds rose from beneath them. Kalam squinted down. Bones, on all sides. The storm had blown out a graveyard – a common enough occurrence. The assassin regained control of his mount, then tried to pierce the ochre gloom. Ladro Landing was nearby, but he could see nothing. He nudged the stallion forward, the animal stepping daintly around the skeletal clumps.

The coastal road appeared ahead, along with guardhouses flanking what had to be the bridge. The village must be on his right –*if the damned thing hasn't blown away.* Beyond the bridge, then, he would find Ladro Keep.

The single-person guardhouses both gaped empty, like sockets in a massive geometric skull.

His horse stabled, Kalam crossed the compound, leaning against the wind and wincing at the ache in his legs as he approached the keep's gatehouse entrance. Ducking within the alcove, he found himself beyond the storm's howl for the first time in hours. Drifts of fine sand filled the gatehouse's corners, but the dusty air was calm. No guardsman held the post: the lone stone bench was vacant.

Kalam raised the heavy iron ring on the wood door, slamming it down hard. He waited. Eventually he heard the bars being drawn on the other side. The door swung back with a grating sound. An old kitchen servant regarded him with his one good eye.

'Inside, then,' he grumbled. 'Join the others.'

Kalam edged past the old man and found himself in a large common room. Faces had turned with his entrance. At the far end of the main table, which ran the length of the rectangular chamber, sat four of the keep's guardsmen, Malazans, looking foul-tempered. Three jugs squatted in puddles of wine on the tabletop. To one side, next along the table, was a wiry, sunken-eyed woman, her face painted in a style best left to young maidens. At her side was an Ehrlii merchant, probably the woman's husband.

Kalam bowed to the group, then approached the table. Another servant, this one younger than the doorman by only a few years, appeared with a fresh jug and a goblet, hesitating until the assassin settled on where he would sit – opposite the merchant couple. He set the goblet down and poured Kalam a half-measure, then backed away.

The merchant showed durhang-stained teeth in a welcoming smile. 'Down from the north, then?'

The wine was some kind of herbal concoction, too sweet and cloying for the climate. Kalam set the goblet down, scowling. 'No beer in this hold?'

The merchant's head bobbed. 'Aye, and chilled at that. Alas, only the wine is free, courtesy of our host.'

'Not surprised it's free,' the assassin muttered. He gestured to the servant. 'A tankard of beer, if you please.'

'Costs a sliver,' the servant said.

'Highway robbery, but my thirst is master.' He found a clipped Jakata and set it on the table.

'Has the village fallen into the sea, then?' the merchant asked. 'On your way down from Ehrlitan, how stands the bridge?'

Kalam saw a small velvet bag on the tabletop in front of the merchant's wife. Glancing up, he met her pitted eyes. She gave him a ghastly wink.

'He'll not add to your gossip, Berkru darling. A stranger come in from the storm, is all you'll learn from this one.'

One of the guardsmen raised his head. 'Got something to hide, have ya? Not guarding a caravan, just riding alone? Deserting the Ehrlitan Guard, or maybe spreading the word of Dryjhna, or both. Now here ya come, expecting the hospitality of the Master – Malazan born and bred.'

Kalam eyed the men. Four belligerent faces. Any denial of the sergeant's accusations would not be believed. The guards had decided he belonged in the dungeon for the night at least, something to break the boredom. Yet the assassin was not interested in shedding blood. He laid his hands flat on the table, slowly rose. 'A word with you, Sergeant,' he said. 'In private.'

The man's dark face turned ugly. 'So you can slit my throat?'

'You believe me capable of that?' Kalam asked in surprise. 'You wear chain, you've a sword at your belt. You've three companions who no doubt will stay close – if only to eavesdrop on the words we exchange between us.'

The sergeant rose. 'I can handle you well enough on my own,' he growled. He strode to the back wall.

Kalam followed. He withdrew a small pendant from under his telaba and held it up. 'Do you recognize this, Sergeant?' he asked softly.

Cautiously, the man leaned forward to study the symbol etched on the pendant's flat surface. Recognition paled his features as he involuntarily mouthed, 'Clawmaster.'

'An end to your questions and accusations, Sergeant. Do not reveal what you now know to your men – at least until after I am gone. Understood?'

The sergeant nodded. 'Pardon, sir,' he whispered.

Kalam hooked a half-smile. 'Your unease is earned. Hood's about to stride this land, and you and I both know it. You erred today, but do not relax your mistrust. Does the Keep Commander understand the situation beyond these walls?'

'Aye, he does.'

The assassin sighed. 'Makes you and your squad among the lucky ones, Sergeant.'

'Aye.'

'Shall we return to the table now?'

The sergeant simply shook his head in answer to his squad's querying expressions.

As Kalam returned to his beer, the merchant's wife reached for the velvet bag. 'The soldiers have each requested a reading of their futures,' she said, revealing a Deck of Dragons. She held the deck in both hands, her unblinking eyes on the assassin. 'And you? Would you know of your future, stranger? Which gods smile upon you, which gods frown—'

'The gods have little time or inclination to spare us any note,' Kalam said with contempt. 'Leave me out of your games, woman.'

'So you cow the sergeant,' she said, smiling, 'and now seek to cow me. See the fear your words have wrought in me? I shake with terror.'

With a disgusted snort, Kalam slid his gaze away.

The common room boomed as the front door was assailed.

'More mysterious travellers!' the woman cackled.

Everyone watched as the doorman reappeared from a side chamber and shuffled towards the door. Whoever waited outside was impatient – thunder rang imperiously through the room even as the old man reached for the bar.

As soon as the bar cleared the latch, the door was pushed hard. The doorman stumbled back. Two armoured figures appeared, the first one a woman. Metal rustled and boots thumped as she strode into the centre of the chamber. Flat eyes surveyed the guards and the other guests, held briefly on each of them before continuing on. Kalam saw no special attention accorded him.

The woman had once held rank – perhaps she still did, although her accoutrements and colours announced no present status; nor was the man behind her wearing anything like a uniform.

Kalam saw weals on both their faces and smiled to himself. They'd run into chigger fleas, and neither looked too pleased about it. The man jerked suddenly as one bit him somewhere beneath his hauberk, cursing, he began loosening the armour's straps.

'No,' the woman snapped.

The man stopped.

She was Pardu, a southern plains tribe; her companion had the look of a northerner – possibly Ehrlii. His dusky skin was a shade paler than the woman's and bare of any tribal tattooing.

'Hood's breath!' the sergeant snarled at the woman. 'Not another step closer! You're both crawling with chiggers. Take the far end of the table. One of the servants will prepare a cedar-chip bath – though that will cost you.'

For a moment the woman seemed ready to resist, but then she gestured to the unoccupied end of the table with one gloved hand and her companion

responded by pulling two chairs back before seating himself stiffly in one of them. The Pardu took the other. 'A flagon of beer,' she said.

'The Master charges for that,' Kalam said, giving her a wry smile.

'The Seven's fate! The cheap bastard – you, servant! Bring me a tankard and I'll judge if it's worth any coin. Quickly now!'

'The woman thinks this a tavern,' one of the guards said.

The sergeant spoke. 'You're here by the grace of this Keep's commander. You'll pay for the beer, you'll pay for the bath, and you'll pay for sleeping on this floor.'

'And this is grace?'

The sergeant's expression darkened – he was Malazan, and he shared the room with a Clawmaster. 'The four walls, the ceiling, the hearth and the use of the stables are free, woman. Yet you complain like a virgin princess – accept the hospitality or be gone.'

The woman's eyes narrowed, then she removed a handful of jakatas from a belt pouch and slammed them on the tabletop. 'I gather,' she said smoothly, 'that your gracious master charges even *you* for beer, Sergeant. So be it, I've no choice but to buy everyone here a tankard.'

'Generous,' the sergeant said with a stiff nod.

'The future shall now be prised loose,' the merchant's wife said, trimming the Deck.

Kalam saw the Pardu flinch upon seeing the cards.

'Spare us,' the assassin said. 'There's nothing to be gained from seeing what's to come, assuming you've any talent at all, which I doubt. Save us all from the embarrassment of your performance.'

Ignoring him, the old woman angled herself to face the guardsmen. 'All your fates rest upon ... this!' She laid out the first card.

Kalam barked a laugh.

'Which one is that?' one of the guards demanded.

'Obelisk,' Kalam said. 'The woman's a fake. As any seer of talent would know, that card's inactive in Seven Cities.'

'An expert in divination, are you?' the old woman snapped.

'I visit a worthy seer before any overland journey,' Kalam replied. 'It would be foolish to do otherwise. I know the Deck, and I've seen when the reading was true, when power showed the hand. No doubt you intended to charge these guardsmen once the reading was done, once you'd told them how rich they were going to become, how they'd live to ripe old ages, fathering heroes by the score—'

Her expression unveiling the charade's end, the old woman screamed with rage and flung the Deck at Kalam. It struck him on the chest, cards clattering on the tabletop in a wild scatter – which settled into a pattern.

The breath hissed from the Pardu woman, the only sound to be heard within the common room.

Suddenly sweating, Kalam looked down at the cards. Six surrounded a single, and that single card – he knew with certainty – was his. *The Rope, Assassin of Shadow.* The six cards encircling it were all of one House. *King, Herald, Mason, Spinner, Knight, Queen . . . High House Death, Hood's House all arrayed . . . around the one who carries the Holy Book of Dryjhna.* 'Ah, well,' Kalam sighed, glancing up at the Pardu woman, 'I guess I sleep alone tonight.'

The Red Blade Captain Lostara Yil and her companion soldier were the last to leave Ladro Keep, over an hour after their target had departed on his stallion, riding south through the dusty wake of the sandstorm.

The forced proximity with Kalam had been unavoidable, but just as he was skilled at deception, so too was Lostara. Bluster could be its own disguise, arrogance a mask hiding an altogether deadlier assurance.

The Deck of Dragons' unexpected fielding had revealed much to Lostara, not only about Kalam and his mission. The Keep's sergeant had shown himself by his expression to have been a co-conspirator – yet another Malazan soldier prepared to betray his Empress. Evidently, Kalam's stop at the Keep had not been as accidental as it appeared.

Checking their horses, Lostara turned as her companion emerged from the Keep. The Red Blade grinned up at her. 'You were thorough, as always,' he said. 'The commander led me a merry chase, however. I found him in the crypt, struggling to climb into a fifty-year-old suit of armour. He was much thinner in his youth, it seems.'

Lostara swung herself into the saddle. 'None still breathing? You're certain you checked them all? What of the servants in the back hallway – I went through them perhaps too quickly.'

'You left not a single heart still beating, Captain.'

'Very good. Mount up. That horse of the assassin's is killing these ones – we shall acquire fresh horses in Intesarm.'

'Assuming Baralta got around to arranging them.' Lostara eyed her companion. 'Trust Baralta,' she said coolly.

'And be glad that – this time – I shall not report your scepticism.'

Tight-lipped, the man nodded. 'Thank you, Captain.'

The two rode down the keep road, turning south on the coastal road.

The entire main floor of the monastery radiated in a circular pattern around a single room that was occupied by a circular staircase of stone leading down into darkness. Mappo crouched beside it.

'This would, I imagine, lead down to the crypt.'

'If I recall correctly,' Icarium said from where he stood near the room's entrance, 'when nuns of the Queen of Dreams die the bodies are simply

wrapped in linen and placed on recessed ledges in the crypt walls. Have you an interest in perusing corpses?'

'Not generally, no,' the Trell said, straightening with a soft grunt. 'It's just that the stone changes as soon the stairs descend below floor level.'

Icarium raised a brow. 'It does?'

'The level we're on is carved from living rock – the cliff's limestone. It's rather soft. But beneath it there are cut granite blocks. I believe the crypt beneath us is an older construct. Either that or the nuns and their cult hold that a crypt's walls and approach must be dressed, whereas living chambers need not be.'

The Jhag shook his head, approaching. 'I would be surprised. The Queen of Dreams is Life-aspected. Very well, shall we explore?'

Mappo descended first. Neither had much need for artificial light, the darkness below offering no obstacle. The spiral steps showed the vestiges of marble tiling, but the passage of many feet long ago had worn most of them away. Beneath, the hard granite defied all evidence of erosion.

The stairs continued down, and down. At the seventieth step they ended in the centre of an octagonally walled chamber. Friezes decorated each wall, the colours hinted at in the many shades of grey. Beyond the staircase's landing, the floor was honeycombed with rectangular pits, cut down through the tiles and the granite blocks beneath removed. These blocks were now stacked over what was obviously a portalway. Within each pit was a shrouded corpse.

The air was dry, scentless.

'These paintings do not belong to the cult of the Queen,' Mappo said, stating the obvious, for the scenes on the walls revealed a dark mythos. Thick fir trees reared black, moss-stained boles on all sides. The effect created was of standing in a glade deep in an ancient forest. Between the trunks here and there was the hint of hulking, four-legged beasts, their eyes glowing as if in reflected moonlight.

Icarium crouched down, running a hand over the remaining tiles. 'This floor held a pattern,' he said, 'before the nuns' workers cut graves in it. Pity.'

Mappo glanced at the blocked doorway. 'If answers to the mysteries here exist, they lie beyond that barricade.'

'Recovered your strength, friend?'

'Well enough.' The Trell went to the barrier, pulled down the highest block. As he tipped it down into his arms, he staggered, voicing a savage grunt. Icarium rushed to help him lower the granite block to the floor. 'Hood's breath! Heavier than I'd expected.'

'I'd gathered that. Shall we work together, then?'

Twenty minutes later they had cleared sufficient blocks to permit their passage into the hallway beyond. The final five minutes they had an audience, as a squall of bhok'aral appeared on the staircase, silently watching their efforts from where they clung from the railings. When first Mappo and then Icarium clambered through the opening, however, the bhok'arala did not follow.

The hallway stretched away before them, a wide colonnade lined by twin columns that were nothing less than the trunks of cedars. Each bole was at least an arm-span in diameter. The shaggy, gouged bark remained, although most of it had fallen away and now lay scattered over the floor.

Mappo laid a hand on one wooden pillar. 'Imagine the effort of bringing these down here.'

'Warren,' Icarium said, sniffing. 'The residue remains, even after all these centuries.'

'After *centuries?* Can you sense which warren, Icarium?'

'Kurald Galain. Elder, the Warren of Darkness.'

'Tiste Andii? In all the histories of Seven Cities that I am aware of, I've never heard mention of Tiste Andii present on this continent. Nor in my homeland, on the other side of the Jhag Odhan. Are you certain? This does not make sense.'

'I am *not* certain, Mappo. It has the feel of Kurald Galain, that is all. The *feel* of Dark. It is not Omtose Phellack nor Tellann. Not Starvald Demelain. I know of no other Elder Warrens.'

'Nor I.'

Without another word the three began walking.

By Mappo's count, the hallway ended three hundred and thirty paces later, opening out into another octagonal chamber, this one with its floor raised a hand's width higher than that of the hallway. Each flagstone was also octagonal, and on each of them images had been intricately carved, then defaced with gouges and scoring in what seemed entirely random, frenzied destruction.

The Trell felt his hackles stiffening into a ridge on his neck as he stood at the room's threshold. Icarium was beside him.

'I do not,' the Jhag said, 'suggest we enter this chamber.'

Mappo grunted agreement. The air stank of sorcery, old, stale and clammy and dense with power. Like waves of heat, magic bled from the flagstones, from the images carved upon them and the wounds many of those images now bore.

Icarium was shaking his head. 'If this is Kurald Galain, its flavour is unknown to me. It is ... corrupted.'

'By the defilement?'

'Possibly. Yet the stench from those claw marks differs from what rises from the flagstones themselves. Is it familiar to you? By Dessembrae's mortal tears it should be, Mappo.'

The Trell squinted down at the nearest flagstone bearing scars. His nostrils flared. 'Soletaken. D'ivers. The spice of shapeshifters. Of course.' He barked out a savage laugh that echoed in the chamber. 'The Path of Hands, Icarium. The gate – it's here.'

'More than a gate, I think,' Icarium said. 'Look upon the undamaged carvings – what do they remind you of?'

Mappo had an answer to that. He scanned the array with growing certainty, but the realization it offered held no answers, only more questions. 'I see the likeness, yet there is an ... unlikeness, as well. Even more irritating, I can think of no possible linkage ...'

'No such answers here,' Icarium said. 'We must go to the place we first intended to find, Mappo. We approach comprehension – I am certain of that.'

'Icarium, do you think Iskaral Pust is preparing for more visitors? Soletaken and D'ivers, the imminent opening of the gate. Is he – and by extension Shadow Realm – the very heart of this convergence?'

'I do not know. Let's ask him.'

They stepped back from the threshold.

'We approach comprehension.' Three words evoking terror within Mappo. He felt like a hare in a master archer's sights, each direction of flight so hopeless as to leave him frozen in place. He stood at the side of powers that staggered his mind, power past and powers present. *The Nameless Ones, with their charges arid hints and visions, their cowled purposes and shrouded desires. Creatures of fraught antiquity, if the Trellish legends held any glimmer of truth. And Icarium, oh, dear friend, I can tell you nothing.* My *curse is silence to your every question, and the hand I offer as a brother will lead you only into deceit. In love's name, I do this, at my own cost . . . and such a cost.*

The bhok'arala awaited them at the stairs and followed the two men at a discreet distance up to the main level.

They found the High Priest in the vestibule he had converted into his sleeping chamber. Muttering to himself, Iskaral Pust was filling a wicker rubbish container with rotted fruit, dead bats and mangled rhizan. He threw Mappo and Icarium a scowl over one shoulder as they stood at the room's entrance.

'If those squalid apes are following you, let them 'ware my wrath,' Iskaral hissed. 'No matter which chamber I choose, they insist on using it as repository for their foul leavings. I have lost patience! They mock a High Priest of Shadow at their peril!'

'We have found the gate,' Mappo said.

Iskaral did not pause in his cleaning. 'Oh, you have, have you? Fools! Nothing is as it seems. A life given for a life taken. You have explored every corner, every cranny, have you? Idiots! Such overconfident bluster is the banner of ignorance. Wave it about and expect me to cower? Hah. I have my secrets, my plans, my schemes. Iskaral Pust's maze of genius cannot be plumbed by the likes of you. Look at you two. Both ancient wanderers of this mortal earth. Why have you not ascended like the rest of them? I'll tell you. Longevity does not automatically bestow wisdom. Oh no, not at all. I trust you are killing every spider you spy. You had better be, for it is the path to wisdom. Oh yes indeed, the path!

'Bhok'arala have small brains. Tiny brains inside their tiny round skulls. Cunning as rats, with eyes like glittering black stones. Four hours, once, I stared into one's eyes, he into mine. Never once pulling gaze away, oh no, this was a contest and one I would not lose. Four hours, face to face, so close I could smell his foul breath and he mine. Who would win? It was in the lap of the gods.'

Mappo glanced at Icarium, then cleared his throat. 'And who, Iskaral Pust, won this . . . this battle of wits?'

Iskaral Pust fixed a pointed stare on Mappo. 'Look upon him who does not waver from his cause, no matter how insipid and ultimately irrelevant, and you shall find in him the meaning of dull-witted. The bhok'aral could have stared into my eyes for ever, for there was no intelligence behind them. Behind his eyes, I mean. It was proof of my superiority that I found distraction elsewhere.'

'Do you intend to lead the D'ivers and Soletaken to the gate below, Iskaral Pust?'

'Blunt are the Trell, determined in headlong stumbling and headlong in stumbling determination. As I said. You know nothing of the mysteries involved, the plans of Shadowthrone, the many secrets of the Grey Keep, the Shrouded House where stands the Throne of Shadow. Yet I do. I, alone among all mortals, have been shown the truth arrayed before me. My god is generous, my god is wise, as cunning as a rat. Spiders must die.

The bhok'arala have stolen my broom and this quest I set before you two guests. Icarium and Mappo Trell, famed wanderers of the world, I charge you with this perilous task – find me my broom.'

Out in the hallway, Mappo sighed. 'Well, that was fruitless. What shall we do now, friend?'

Icarium looked surprised. 'It should be obvious, Mappo. We must take on this perilous quest. We must find Iskaral Pust's broom.'

'We have explored this monastery, Icarium,' the Trell said wearily. 'I noticed no broom.'

The Jhag's mouth quirked slightly. 'Explored? Every corner, every cranny? I think not. Our first task, however, is to the kitchen. We must outfit ourselves for our impending explorations.'

'You are serious.'

'I am.'

The flies were biting in the heat, as foul-tempered as everything else beneath the blistering sun. People filled Hissar's fountains until midday, crowded shoulder to shoulder in the tepid, murky waters, before retiring to the cooler shade of their homes. It was not a day for going outside, and Duiker found himself scowling as he drew on a loose, thinly woven telaba while Bult waited by the door.

'Why not under the moon,' the historian muttered. 'Cool night air, stars high overhead with every spirit looking down. Now *that* would ensure

success!'

Bult's sardonic grin did not help matters. Strapping on his rope belt, Duiker turned to the grizzled commander. 'Very well, lead on, Uncle.'

The Wickan's grin widened, deepening the scar until it seemed he had two smiles instead of one.

Outside, Kulp waited with the mounts, astride his own small, sturdy-looking horse. Duiker found the cadre mage's glum expression perversely pleasing.

They rode through almost empty streets. It was marrok: early afternoon, when sane people retired indoors to wait out the worst of the summer heat. The historian had grown accustomed to napping during marrok; he was feeling grumpy, all too out of sorts to attend Sormo's ritual. Warlocks were notorious for their impropriety, their deliberate discombobulating of common sense. For the *defence of decency done, the Empress might be excused the executions.* He grimaced – clearly not an opinion to be safely voiced within hearing range of any Wickans.

They reached the city's northern end and rode out on a coastal track for half a league before swinging inland, into the wastes of the Odhan. The oasis they approached an hour later was dead, the spring long since dried up. All that remained of what had once been a lush, natural garden amidst the sands was a stand of withered, gnarled cedars rising from a carpet of tumbled palms.

Many of the trees bore strange projections that drew Duiker's curiosity as they led their horses closer.

'Are those horns in the trees?' Kulp asked.

'Bhederin, I think,' the historian replied. 'Jammed into a fork, then grown past, leaving them embedded deep in the wood. These trees were likely a thousand years old before the water vanished.'

The mage grunted. 'You'd think they'd be cut down by now, this close to Hissar.'

'The horns are warnings,' Bult said. 'Holy ground. Once, long ago. Memories remain.'

'As well they should,' Duiker muttered. 'Sormo should be avoiding hallowed sand, not seeking it out. If this place is aspected, it's likely an inimical one to a Wickan warlock.'

'I've long since learned to trust Sormo E'nath's judgement, Historian. You'd do well to learn the like.'

'It's a poor scholar who trusts anyone's judgement,' Duiker said. 'Even and perhaps especially his own.'

'"You walk shifting sands,"' Bult sighed, then gave him another grin, 'as the locals would say.'

'What would you Wickans say?' Kulp asked.

Bult's eyes glittered with mischief. 'Nothing. Wise words are like arrows flung at your forehead. What do you do? Why, you duck, of course. This truth a Wickan knows from the time he first learns to ride – long before he learns to walk.'

They found the warlock in a clearing. The drifts of sand had been swept aside, revealing a heaved and twisted brick floor – all that remained of a structure of some sort. Chips of obsidian glittered in the joins.

Kulp dismounted, eyeing Sormo who stood in the centre, hands hidden within heavy sleeves. He swatted at a fly. 'What's this, then, some lost, forgotten temple?'

The young Wickan slowly blinked. 'My assistants concluded it had been a stable. They then left without elaborating.'

Kulp scowled at Duiker. 'I despise Wickan humour,' he whispered.

Sormo gestured them closer. 'It is my intention to open myself to the sacred aspect of this kheror, which is the name Wickans give to holy places open to the skies—'

'Are you mad?' Kulp's face had gone white. 'Those spirits will rip your throat out, child. They are of the Seven—'

'They are not,' the warlock retorted. 'The spirits in this kheror were raised in the time before the Seven. They are the land's own and if you must liken them to a known aspect, then it must be Tellann.'

'Hood's mercy,' Duiker groaned. 'If it is indeed Tellann, then you will be dealing with T'lan Imass, Sormo. The undead warriors have turned their backs on the Empress and all that is the Empire, ever since the Emperor's assassination.'

The warlock's eyes were bright. 'And have you not wondered why?'

The historian's mouth snapped shut. He had theories in that regard, but to voice them – *to anyone* – would be treason.

Kulp's dry question to Sormo broke through Duiker's thoughts. 'And has Empress Laseen tasked you with this? Are you here to seek a sense of future events or is that just a feint?'

Bult had stood a few paces from them saying nothing, but now he spat. 'We need no seer to guess that, Mage.'

The warlock raised his arms out to his sides. 'Stay close,' he said to Kulp, then his eyes slid to the historian. 'And you, see and remember all you will witness here.'

'I am already doing so, Warlock.'

Sormo nodded, closed his eyes.

His power spread like a faint, subtle ripple, sweeping over Duiker and the others to encompass the entire clearing. Daylight faded abruptly, replaced by a soft dusk, the dry air suddenly damp and smelling of marshlands.

Ringing the glade like sentinels were cypresses. Mosses hung from branches in curtains, hiding what lay beyond in impenetrable shadow.

Duiker could feel Sormo E'nath's sorcery like a warm cloak; he had never before felt a power such as this one. Calm and protective, strong yet

yielding. He wondered at the Empire's loss in exterminating these warlocks. An *error she's clearly corrected, though it might well be too late. How many warlocks were lost in truth?*

Sormo loosed an ululating cry that echoed as if they stood within a vast cavern.

The next moment the air was alive with icy winds, arriving in warring gusts. Sormo staggered, his eyes now open and widening with alarm. He drew a breath, then visibly recoiled at the taste and Duiker could not blame him. Bestial stench rode the winds, growing fouler by the moment.

Taut violence filled the glade, a sure promise announced in the sudden thrashing of the moss-laden branches. The historian saw a swarming cloud approach Bult from behind and shouted a warning. The Wickan whirled, long-knives in his hands. He screamed as the first of the wasps stung.

'D'ivers!' Kulp bellowed, one hand grasping Duiker's telaba and pulling the historian back to where Sormo stood as if dazed.

Rats scampered over the soft ground, shrilly screaming as they attacked a writhing bundle of snakes.

The historian felt heat on his legs, looked down. Fire ants swarmed him up to his thighs. The heat rose to agony. He screamed.

Swearing, Kulp unleashed his warren in a pulse of power. Shrivelled ants fell from the historian's legs like dust. The attacking swarm flinched back, the D'ivers retreating.

The rats had overrun the snakes and now closed in on Sormo. The Wickan frowned at them.

Off where Bult crouched slapping futilely at the stinging wasps, liquid fire erupted in a swath, the flames tumbling over the veteran.

Tracking back to the fire's source, Duiker saw that an enormous demon had entered the clearing. Midnight-skinned and twice the height of a man, the creature voiced a roar of fury and launched a savage attack on a white-furred bear – the glade was alive with D'ivers and Soletaken, the air filled

with shrieks and snarls. The demon landed on the bear, driving it to the ground with a snap and crunch of bones. Leaving the animal twitching, the black demon leapt to one side and roared a second time, and this time Duiker heard meaning within it.

'It's warning us!' he shouted at Kulp.

Like a lodestone the demon's arrival drew the D'ivers and Soletaken. They fought each other in a frenzied rush to attack the creature.

'We have to get out of here!' Duiker said. 'Pull us out, Kulp –now!'

The mage hissed in rage. 'How? This is Sormo's ritual, you damned book-grub!'

The demon vanished beneath a mob of creatures, yet clearly remained upright, as the D'ivers and Soletaken clambered up what seemed a solid pillar of stone. Black-skinned arms appeared, flinging away dead and dying creatures. But it could not last.

'Hood take you, Kulp! Think of something!'

The mage's face tightened. 'Drag Bult to Sormo. Quickly! Leave the warlock to me.' With that, Kulp bolted to Sormo, shouting in an effort to wake the youth from whatever spell held him. Duiker spun to where Bult lay huddled five paces away. His legs felt impossibly heavy beneath the prickling pain of the ant bites as he staggered to the Wickan.

The veteran had been stung scores of times, his flesh was misshapen with fiery swelling. He was unconscious, possibly dead. Duiker gripped the man's harness and dragged him to where Kulp continued accosting Sormo E'nath.

As the historian arrived, the demon gave one last shriek, then disappeared beneath the mound of attackers. The D'ivers and Soletaken then surged towards the four men.

Sormo E'nath was oblivious, his eyes glazed, unheeding of the mage's efforts to shout him into awareness.

'Wake him or we're dead,' Duiker gasped, stepping over Bult to face the charging beasts with naught but a small knife.

The weapon would little avail him as a seething cloud of hornets swiftly closed the distance.

The scene was jolted, and Duiker saw they were back in the dead oasis. The D'ivers and Soletaken were gone. The historian turned to Kulp. 'You did it! How?'

The mage glanced down at a sprawled, moaning Sormo E'nath. 'I'll pay for it,' he muttered, then met Duiker's eyes. 'I punched the lad. Damn near broke my hand doing it, too. It was *his* nightmare, wasn't it?'

The historian blinked, then shook himself and crouched down beside Bult. 'This poison will kill him long before we can get help—'

Kulp squatted, ran his good hand over the veteran's swollen face. 'Not poison. More like an infecting warren. I can deal with this, Duiker. As with your legs.' He closed his eyes in concentration.

Sormo E'nath slowly pushed himself into sitting position. He looked around, then tenderly touched his jaw, where the ridged imprint of Kulp's knuckles stood like puckered islands in a spreading flush of red.

'He had no choice,' Duiker told him.

The warlock nodded.

'Can you talk? Any loose teeth?'

'Somewhere,' he said clearly, 'a crow flaps broken-winged on the ground. There are but ten left.'

'What happened there, Warlock?'

Sormo's eyes flicked nervously. 'Something unexpected, Historian. A convergence is underway. The Path of Hands. The gate of the Soletaken and the D'ivers. An unhappy coincidence.'

Duiker scowled. 'You said Tellann—'

'And so it was,' the warlock cut in. 'Is there a blending between shapeshifting and Elder Tellann? Unknown. Perhaps the D'ivers and Soletaken are simply passing through the warren – imagining it unoccupied by T'lan Imass and therefore safer. Indeed, no T'lan Imass to take umbrage with the trespass, leaving them with only each other to battle.'

'They're welcome to annihilate each other, then,' the historian grumbled, his legs slowly giving way beneath him until like Sormo he sat on the ground.

'I shall help you in a moment,' Kulp called over.

Nodding, Duiker found himself watching a dung beetle struggle heroically to push aside a fragment of palm bark. He sensed something profound in what he watched, but was too weary to pursue it.

CHAPTER FIVE

> Bhok'arala seem to have originated in the wastes of Raraku. Before long, these social creatures spread outward and were soon seen throughout Seven Cities. As efficacious rat control in settlements, the bhok'arala were not only tolerated, but often encouraged. It was not long before a lively trade in domesticated breeds became a major export...
>
> The usage and demonic investment of this species among mages and alchemists is a matter for discussion within treatises more specific than this one. *Bank's Three Hundred and* Twenty-first Treatise offers a succinct analysis for interested scholars ...
>
> *Denizens of Raraku*
> Imrygyn Tallobant

With the exception of the sandstorm – which they had waited out in Trob – and the unsettling news of a massacre at Ladro Keep, told to them by an outrider from a well-guarded caravan bound for Ehrlitan, the journey to within sight of G'danisban had proved uneventful for Fiddler, Crokus and Apsalar.

Although Fiddler knew that the risks that lay ahead, south of the small city out in the Pan'potsun Odhan, were severe enough to eat holes in his stomach, he had anticipated a lull in the final approach to G'danisban. What he had not expected to find was a ragtag renegade army encamped outside the city walls.

The army's main force straddled the road but was shielded by a dun line of hills on the north side. The canal road led the three unsuspecting travellers into the camp's perimeter lines. There had been no warning.

A company of footmen commanded the rosad from flanking hills and oversaw diligent questioning of all who sought entry to the city. The company was supported by a score of Arak tribal horsewarriors who were evidently entrusted with riding down any traveller inclined to flee the approach to the makeshift barricade.

Fiddler and his charges would have to ride on through and trust to their disguises. The sapper was anything but confident, although this lent a typically Gral scowl to his narrow features which elicited a wholly proper wariness in two of the three guards who stepped forward to intercept them at the barricade.

'The city is closed,' the unimpressed guard nearest them said, punctuating his words by spitting between the hooves of Fiddler's mount.

It would later be said that even a Gral's horse knew an insult when it saw one. Before Fiddler could react, his mount's head snapped forward, stripping the reins from the sapper's hands, and bit the guardsman in the face. The horse had twisted its head so that the jaws closed round the man's cheeks and tore into cheeks, upper lip and nose. Blood gushed. The guardsman dropped like a sack of stones, a piercing, keening sound rising from him.

For lack of anything else to grip, Fiddler snagged the gelding's ears and pulled hard, backing the beast away even as it prepared to stomp on the guard's huddled form. Hiding his shock behind an even fiercer frown, the sapper unleashed a stream of Gral curses at the two remaining men, who had both backed frantically clear before lowering their pikes. 'Foul snot of rabid dogs! Anal crust of dysenteried goats! Such a sight for two young newlyweds to witness! Will you curse their marriage but two weeks since the blessed day? Shall I loose the fleas on my head to rend your worthless flesh from your jellied bones?'

As Fiddler roared every Gral utterance of disgust he could recall in an effort to keep the guards unbalanced, a troop of the Arak horsewarriors rode up with savage haste.

'Gral! Ten jakatas for your horse!'

'Twelve, Gral! To me!'

'Fifteen and my youngest daughter!'

'Five jakatas for three tail hairs!'

Fiddler turned his fiercest frown on the riders. 'Not one of you is fit to smell my horse's farts!' But he grinned, unstrapping a beer-filled bladder and tossing it one-handed to the nearest Arak. 'But let us camp with your troop this night and for a sliver you may feel its heat with your palms – once only! For more you must pay!'

With wild grins, the Araks passed the skin between them, each taking deep swigs to finalize the ritual exchange. By sharing beer, Fiddler had granted them status as equals, the gesture stripping the cutting barb from the insult he had thrown their way.

Fiddler glanced back at Crokus and Apsalar. They looked properly shaken. Biting back his own nausea, the sapper winked.

The guards had recovered but before they could close in, the tribesmen drove their mounts to block them.

'Ride with us!' one of the Araks shouted to Fiddler. As one, the troop wheeled about. Regaining the reins, Fiddler spurred the gelding after them, sighing when he heard behind him the newlyweds following suit.

It was to be a race to the Arak camp, and, true to its sudden legendary status, the Gral horse was determined to burst every muscle in its body to win. Fiddler had never before ridden such a game beast, and he found himself grinning in spite of himself, even as the image of the guardsman's ravaged face remained like a chill knot in the pit of his stomach.

The Arak tipis lined the edges of a nearby hill's windswept summit, each set wide apart so that no shade from a neighbour's could cast insult. Women and children came to the crest to watch the race, screaming as Fiddler's mount burst through the leading line, swerving to throw a shoulder into the fastest competitor. That horse stumbled, almost pitching its rider from his wood and felt saddle, then righted itself with a furious scream at being driven from the race.

Unimpeded, Fiddler leaned forward as his horse reached the slope and surged up its grassy side. The line of watchers parted as he reached the crest and reined in amidst the tipis.

As any plains tribe would, the Arak chose hilltops rather than valley floors for their camps. The winds kept the insects to a minimum – boulders held down the tipi edges to prevent the hide tents from blowing away – and the rising and setting of the sun could be witnessed to mark ritual thanksgiving.

The camp's layout was a familiar one to Fiddler, who had ridden with Wickan scouts over these lands during the Emperor's campaigns. Marking the centre of the ring of tipis was a stone-lined hearth. Four wooden posts off to one side, between two tipis, and joined together with a single hemp rope, provided the corral for the horses. Bundles of rolled felt lay drying nearby, along with tripods bearing stretched hides and strips of meat.

The dozen or so camp dogs surrounded the snapping gelding as Fiddler paused in the saddle to take his bearings. The scrawny, yipping mongrels might prove a problem, he realized, but he hoped that their suspicions would apply to all strangers, Gral included. If not, then his disguise was over.

The troop arrived moments later, the horsewarriors shouting and laughing as they reined in and threw themselves from their saddles. Appearing last on the summit's crest were Crokus and Apsalar, neither of whom seemed ready to share in the good humour.

Seeing their faces reminded Fiddler of the mangled guardsman on the road below. He regained his scowl and slipped from the saddle. 'The city is closed?' he shouted. 'Another Mezla folly!'

The Arak rider who'd spoken before strode up, a fierce grin on his lean face. 'Not Mezla! G'danisban has been liberated! The southern hares have fled the Whirlwind's promise.'

'Then why was the city closed to us? Are we Mezla?'

'A cleansing, Gral! Mezla merchants and nobles infest G'danisban. They were arrested yesterday and this day they are being executed. Tomorrow morning you shall lead your blessed couple into a free city. Come, this night we celebrate!'

Fiddler squatted in Gral fashion. 'Has Sha'ik raised the Whirlwind, then?' He glanced back at Crokus and Apsalar, as if suddenly regretting having taken on the responsibility. 'Has the war begun, Arak?'

'Soon,' he said. 'We were cursed with impatience,' he added with a smirk.

Crokus and Apsalar approached. The Arak went off to assist in the preparations for the night's festivities. Coins were flung at the gelding's hooves and hands cautiously reached out to rest lightly on the animal's neck and flanks. For the moment the three travellers were alone.

'That was a sight I will never forget,' Crokus said, 'though I wish to Hood I could. Will the poor man live?'

Fiddler shrugged. 'If he chooses to.'

'We're camping here tonight?' Apsalar asked, looking around.

'Either that or insult these Arak and risk disembowelling.'

'We will not fool them for much longer,' Apsalar said. 'Crokus doesn't speak a word of this land's tongue, and mine is a Malazan's accent.'

'That soldier was my age,' the Daru thief muttered.

Frowning, the sapper said, 'Our only other choice is to ride into G'danisban, so that we may witness the Whirlwind's vengeance.'

'Another celebration of what's to come?' Crokus demanded. 'This damned Apocalypse you're always talking about? I get the feeling that this land's people do nothing but talk.'

Fiddler cleared his throat. 'Tonight's celebration in G'danisban,' he said slowly, 'will be the flaying alive of a few hundred Malazans, Crokus. If we show eagerness to witness such an event, these Arak may not be offended by our leaving early.'

Apsalar turned to watch half a dozen tribesmen approach. 'Try it, Fiddler,' she said.

The sapper came close to saluting. He hissed a curse. 'You giving me orders, Recruit?'

She blinked. 'I think I was giving orders . .. when you were still clutching the hem of your mother's dress, Fiddler. I know – the one who possessed me. It's *his* instincts that are ringing like steel on stone right now. Do as I say.'

The chance for a retort vanished as the Arak arrived. 'You are blessed, Gral!' one of them said. 'A Gral clan is on its way to join the Apocalypse! Let us hope that like you they bring their own beer!'

Fiddler made a kin gesture, then soberly shook his head. 'It cannot be,' he said, mentally holding his breath. 'I am outcast. More, these newlyweds insist we enter the city ... to witness the executions in further blessing of their binding. I am their escort, and so must obey their commands.'

Apsalar stepped forward and bowed. 'We wish no offence,' she said.

It wasn't going well. The Arak faces arrayed before them had darkened. 'Outcast? No kin to honour your trail, Gral? Perhaps we shall hold you for your brothers' vengeance, and in exchange they leave us your horse.'

With exquisite perfection, Apsalar stamped one foot to announce the rage of a pampered daughter and new wife. 'I am with child! Defy me and be cursed! We go to the city! Now!'

'Hire one of us for the rest of your journey, blessed lady! But leave the riven Gral! He is not fit to serve you!'

Trembling, Apsalar prepared to lift her veil, announcing the intention to voice her curse.

The Araks flinched back.

'You covet the gelding! This is nothing more than greed! I shall now curse you all—'

'Forgive!' 'We bow down, blessed lady!' 'Touch not your veil!' 'Ride on, then! To the city below! Ride on!'

Apsalar hesitated. For a moment Fiddler thought she would curse them anyway. Instead she spun about. 'Escort us once more, Gral,' she said.

Surrounded by worried, frightened faces, the three mounted up.

An Arak who had spoken earlier now stepped close to the sapper. 'Stay only the night, then ride on hard, Gral. Your kin will pursue you.'

'Tell them,' Fiddler said, 'I won the horse in a fair fight. Tell them that.'

The Arak frowned. 'Will they know the story?'

'Which clan?'

'Sebark.'

The sapper shook his head.

'Then they shall ride you down for the pleasure of it. But I shall tell them your words, anyway. Indeed, your horse was worth killing for.'

Fiddler thought back to the drunken Gral he'd bought the gelding from in Ehrlitan. Three jakata. The tribesmen who moved into the cities lost much. 'Drink my beer this night, Arak?'

'We shall. Before the Gral arrive. Ride on.'

As they rode onto the road and approached G'danisban's north gate, Apsalar said to him, 'We are in trouble now, aren't we?'

'Is that what your instincts tell you, lass?'

She grimaced.

'Aye,' Fiddler sighed. 'That we are. I made a mistake with that outcast story. I think now, given your performance back there, that the threat of your curse would have sufficed.'

'Probably.'

Crokus cleared his throat. 'Are we going to actually watch these executions, Fid?'

The sapper shook his head. 'Not a chance. We're riding straight through, if we can.' He glanced at Apsalar. 'Let your courage falter, lass. Another temper tantrum and the citizens will rush you out the south gate on a bed of gold.'

She acknowledged him with a wry smile.

Don't fall in love with this woman, Fid, old friend, else you loosen your guard of the lad's life, and call it an accident of fate ...

Spilled blood stained the worn cobbles under the arched north gate and a scatter of wooden toys lay broken and crushed to either side of the causeway. From somewhere close came the screams of children dying.

'We can't do this,' Crokus said, all the colour gone from his face. He rode at Fiddler's side, Apsalar holding her mount close behind them. Looters and armed men appeared now and then farther down the street, but the way into the city seemed strangely open. A haze of smoke hung over everything, and the burnt-out shells of merchant stores and residences gaped desolation on all sides.

They rode amidst scorched furniture, shattered pottery and ceramics, and bodies twisted in postures of violent death. The children's dying screams, off to their right, had mercifully stopped, but other, more distant screams rose eerily from G'danisban's heart.

They were startled by a figure darting across their paths, a young girl, naked and bruised. She ran as if oblivious to them, and clambered under a broken-wheeled cart not fifteen paces from Fiddler and his party. They watched her scramble under cover.

Six armed men approached from a side street. Their weapons were haphazard, and none wore armour. Blackened blood stained their ragged telaban. One spoke. 'Gral! You see a girl? We're not done with her.'

Even as he asked his question, another of them grinned and gestured to the cart. The girl's knees and feet were clearly visible.

'A Mezla?' Fiddler asked.

The group's leader shrugged. 'Well enough. Fear not, Gral, we'll share.'

The sapper heard Apsalar draw a long, slow breath. He eased back in his saddle.

The group split in passing around Fiddler, Crokus and Apsalar. The sapper casually leaned after the nearest man and thrust the point of his long-knife into the base of his skull. The Gral gelding pivoted beneath Fiddler and kicked out with both rear hooves, shattering another man's chest and propelling him backward, sprawling on the cobbles.

Regaining control of the gelding, Fiddler drove his heels into its flanks. They bolted forward, savagely riding down the group's generous leader. From under the horse's stamping hooves came the sound of snapping bones and the sickening crushing of his skull. Fiddler twisted in the saddle to find the remaining three men.

Two of them writhed in keening pain near Apsalar, who sat calm in the saddle, a thick-bladed kethra knife in each gloved hand.

Crokus had dismounted and was now crouching over the last body, removing a throwing knife from a blood-drenched throat.

They all turned at a grinding of potsherds to see the girl claw her way clear of the cart, scramble to her feet, then race into the shadows of an alley, disappearing from view.

The sound of horsemen coming from the north gate reached them.

'Ride on!' Fiddler snapped.

Crokus leapt onto his mount's back. Apsalar sheathed her blades and gave the sapper a nod as she gathered up the reins.

'Ride through – to the south gate!'

Fiddler watched the two of them gallop on, then he slipped from the gelding's back and approached the two men Apsalar had wounded. 'Ah,' he breathed when he came close and saw their slashed-open crotches, 'that's the lass I know.'

The troop of horsemen arrived. They all wore ochre sashes diagonally across their chain-covered chests. Their commander opened his mouth to speak but Fiddler was first.

'Is no man's daughter safe in this seven-cursed city? She was no Mezla, by my ancestors! Is this your Apocalypse? Then I pray the pit of snakes awaits you in the Seven Hells!'

The commander was frowning. 'Gral, you say these men were rapists?'

'A Mezla slut gets what she deserves, but the girl was no Mezla.'

'So you killed these men. All six of them.'

'Aye.'

'Who were the other two riders with you?'

'The pilgrims I am sworn to protect.'

'And yet they ride into the city's heart... without you at their side.'

Fiddler scowled.

The commander scanned the victims. 'Two yet live.'

'May they be cursed with a hundred thousand more breaths before Hood takes them.'

The commander leaned on his saddlehorn and was silent a moment. 'Rejoin your pilgrims, Gral. They have need of your services.'

Growling, Fiddler remounted. 'Who rules G'danisban now?'

'None. The army of the Apocalypse holds but two districts. We shall have the others by the morrow.'

Fiddler pulled the horse around and kicked it into a canter. The troop did not follow. The sapper swore under his breath – the commander was right, he should not have sent Crokus and Apsalar on. He knew himself lucky in that his remaining with the rapists could so easily be construed as typically Gral – the opportunity to brag to the red-swathed riders, the chance to voice curses and display a tribesman's unassailable arrogance – but it risked offering up to contempt his vow to protect his charges. He'd seen the mild disgust in the commander's eyes. In all, he'd been *too* much of a Gral horsewarrior. If not for Apsalar's frightening talents, those two would now be in serious trouble.

He rode hard in pursuit, noting belatedly that the gelding was responding to his every touch. The horse knew he was no Gral, but it'd evidently decided he was behaving in an approved manner, well enough to accord him some respect. It was, he reflected, this day's lone victory.

G'danisban's central square was the site of past slaughter. Fiddler caught up with his companions when they had just begun walking their horses through the horrific scene. They both turned upon hearing his approach, and Fiddler could only nod at the relief in their faces when they recognized him.

Even the Gral gelding hesitated at the square's edge. The bodies covering the cobbles numbered several hundred. Old men and old women, and children, for the most part. They had all been savagely cut to pieces or, in some cases, burned alive. The stench of sun-warmed blood, bile and seared flesh hung thick in the square.

Fiddler swallowed back his revulsion, cleared his throat. 'Beyond this square,' he said, 'all pretences of control cease.'

Crokus gestured shakily. 'These are Malazan?'

'Aye, lad.'

'During the conquest, did the Malazan armies do the same to the locals here?'

'You mean, is this just reprisal?'

Apsalar spoke with an almost personal vehemence. 'The Emperor warred against armies, not civilians—'

'Except at Aren,' Fiddler sardonically interjected, recalling his words with the Tanno Spiritwalker. 'When the T'lan Imass rose in the city—'

'Not by Kellanved's command!' she retorted. 'Who ordered the T'lan Imass into Aren? I shall tell you. Surly, the commander of the Claw, the woman who took upon herself a new name—'

'Laseen.' Fiddler eyed the young woman quizzically. 'I have never before heard that assertion, Apsalar. There were no written orders – none found, in any case—'

'I should have killed her there and then,' Apsalar muttered.

Astonished, Fiddler glanced at Crokus. The Daru shook his head.

'Apsalar,' the sapper said slowly, 'you were but a child when Aren rebelled then fell to the T'lan Imass.'

'I know that,' she replied. 'Yet these memories... they are so clear. I was... sent to Aren ... to see the slaughter. To find out what happened. I... I *argued* with Surly. No-one else was in the room. Just Surly and ... and me.'

They reached the other end of the square. Fiddler reined in and regarded Apsalar for a long moment.

Crokus said, 'It was the Rope, the patron god of assassins, who possessed you. Yet your memories are—'

'Dancer's.' As soon as he said it, Fiddler knew it was true. 'The Rope has another name. Cotillion. Hood's breath, so obvious! No-one doubted that the assassinations occurred. Both Dancer and the Emperor ... murdered by Laseen and her chosen Clawmasters. What did Laseen do with the bodies? No-one knows.'

'So Dancer lived,' Crokus said with a frown. 'And ascended. Became a patron god in the Warren of Shadow.'

Apsalar said nothing, watching and listening with a carefully controlled absence of expression on her face.

Fiddler was cursing himself for a blind idiot. 'What House appeared in the Deck of Dragons shortly afterward? Shadow. Two new Ascendants. Cotillion ... and Shadowthrone ...'

Crokus's eyes widened. 'Shadowthrone is Kellanved,' he said. 'They weren't assassinated – either of them. They escaped by ascending.'

'Into the Shadow Realm.' Fiddler smiled wryly. 'To nurse their thoughts of vengeance, leading eventually to Cotillion possessing a young fishergirl in Itko Kan, to begin what would be a long, devious path to Laseen. Which failed. Apsalar?'

'Your words are true,' she said without inflection.

'Then why,' the sapper demanded, 'didn't Cotillion reveal himself to us? To Whiskeyjack, to Kalam? To Dujek? Dammit, Dancer knew us all – and if that bastard understood the notion of friendship at all, then those I've just mentioned were his friends—'

Apsalar's sudden laugh rattled both men. 'I could lie and say he sought to protect you all. Do you really wish the truth, Bridgeburner?'

Fiddler felt himself flushing. 'I do,' he growled.

'Dancer trusted but two men. One was Kellanved. The other was Dassem Ultor, the First Sword. Dassem is dead. I am sorry if this offends you, Fiddler. Thinking on it, I would suggest that *Cotillion* trusts no-one. Not even Shadowthrone. Emperor Kellanved ... well enough. *Ascendant* Kellanved – Shadowthrone – ah, that is something wholly different.'

'He was a fool,' Fiddler pronounced, gathering up his reins.

Apsalar's smile was strangely wistful.

'Enough words,' Crokus said. 'Let's get out of this damned city.'

'Aye.'

The short journey from the square to the south gate was surprisingly uneventful, for all the commander's warnings. Dusk shrouded the streets and smoke from a burning tenement block spread an acrid haze that made breathing tortured. They rode through the silent aftermath of slaughter, when the rage has passed and awareness returns with shock and shame.

The moment was a single indrawn breath in what Fiddler knew would be an ever-burgeoning wildfire. If the Malazan legions had not been withdrawn from nearby Pan'potsun, there would have been the chance of crushing the life from this first spark, with a brutality to match the renegades'. When slaughter is flung back on the perpetrators, the thirst for blood is quickly quenched.

The Emperor would have acted swiftly, decisively. Hood's *breath, he would never have let it slide this far.*

Less than a tenth of a bell after leaving the square they passed beneath the smoke-blackened arch of an unguarded south gate. Beyond stretched the Pan'potsun Odhan, flanked to the west by the ridge that divided the Odhan from the Holy Desert Raraku. The night's first stars flickered alight overhead.

Fiddler broke the long silence. 'There is a village a little over two leagues to the south. With luck it won't be a carrion feast. Not yet, anyway.'

Crokus cleared his throat. 'Fiddler, if Kalam had known ... about Dancer, I mean, Cotillion ...'

The sapper grimaced, glanced at Apsalar. 'She'd be with him right now.'

Whatever response Crokus intended was interrupted by a squealing, flapping shape that dropped down out of the darkness to collide with the lad's back. Crokus let out a shout of alarm as the creature gripped his hair and clambered onto his head.

'It's just Moby,' Fiddler said, trying to shake off the jitters the familiar's arrival had elicited. He squinted. 'Looks like he's been in a scrap,' he observed.

Crokus pulled Moby down into his arms. 'He's bleeding everywhere!'

'Nothing serious, I'd guess,' Fiddler said.

'What makes you so sure?'

The sapper grinned. 'Ever seen bhok'arala mate?'

'Fiddler,' Apsalar's tone was tight. 'We are pursued.'

Reining in, Fiddler rose in the stirrups and twisted around. In the distant gloom was a cloud of dust. He hissed a curse. 'The Gral clan.'

'We ride weary mounts,' Apsalar said.

'Aye. Queen grant us there's fresh horses to be had in New Velar.'

At the base of three converging gorges, Kalam left the false path and carefully guided his horse through a narrow drainage channel. The old memories of the ways into Raraku felt heavy in his bones. *Everything's changed, yet nothing has changed.*

Of the countless trails that passed through the hills, all but a few led only to death. The false routes were cleverly directed away from the few waterholes and springs. Without water, Raraku's sun was a fatal companion. Kalam knew the Holy Desert, the map within his head – decades old – was seared anew with every landmark he recognized. Pinnacles, tilted rocks, the wend of a flood channel – he felt as if he had never left, for all his new loyalties, his conflicting allegiances. *Once more, a child of this desert. Once more, servant to its sacred need.*

As the wind and sun did to the sand and stone, Raraku shaped all who had known it. Crossing it had etched the souls of the three companies that would come to be called the Bridgeburners. *We could imagine no other name. Raraku burned our pasts away, making all that came before a trail of ashes.*

He swung the stallion onto a scree, rocks and sand skittering and tumbling as the beast scrambled up the slope, regaining the true path along the ridge line that would run in a slow descent westward to Raraku's floor.

Stars glittered like knife-points overhead. The bleached limestone crags shone silver in the faint moonlight, as if reflecting back memories of the day just past.

The assassin led his horse between the crumbled foundations of two watchtowers. Potsherds and fractured brick crunched under the stallion's hooves. Rhizan darted from his path with a soft flit of wings. Kalam felt he had returned home.

'No farther,' a rasping voice warned.

Smiling, Kalam reined in.

'A bold announcement,' the voice continued. 'A stallion the colour of sand, red telaba ...'

'I announce what I am,' Kalam replied casually. He had pinpointed the source of the voice, in the deep shadows of a sinkhole just beyond the left-hand watchtower. There was a crossbow trained on the assassin, but Kalam knew he could dodge the quarrel, rolling from the saddle with the stallion between him and the stranger. Two well-thrown knives into the darker shape amidst the shadows would punctuate the exchange. He felt at ease.

'Disarm him,' the voice drawled.

Two massive hands closed on his wrists from behind and savagely pulled both his arms back, until he was dragged, cursing with rage, over the stallion's rump. As soon as he cleared the beast, the hands twisted his body around and drove him hard, face first, into the stony ground. The air knocked from his lungs, Kalam was helpless.

He heard the one who'd spoken rise up from the sinkhole and approach. The stallion snapped his teeth but was swiftly calmed at a soft word from the stranger. The assassin listened as the saddlebags were lifted away and set on the ground. Flaps opened. 'Ah, he's the one, then.'

The hands released Kalam. Groaning, the assassin managed to roll over. A giant of a man stood over him, his face tattooed like shattered glass. A long single braid hung down the left side of his chest. The man wore a cloak of bhederin hide over a vest of armour that seemed made of clam shells. The

wooden handle and stone pommel of a bladed weapon of some kind jutted from just under his left arm. The broad belt over the man's loincloth was oddly decorated with what looked to Kalam like dried mushroom caps of various sizes. He was over seven foot tall, yet muscled enough to seem wide, and his flat, broad face gazed down without expression.

Regaining his breath, the assassin sat up. 'A sorcerous silence,' he muttered, mostly to himself.

The man who now held the Book of the Apocalypse heard the gruff whisper and snorted. 'You fancy no mortal could get that close to you without your hearing him. You tell yourself it must have involved magic. You are wrong. My companion is Toblakai, an escaped slave from the Laederon Plateau of Genabackis. He's seen seventeen summers and has personally killed forty-one enemies. Those are their ears on his belt.' The man rose, offering Kalam his hand. 'You are most welcome to Raraku, Deliverer. Our long vigil is ended.'

Grimacing, Kalam accepted the man's hand and felt himself pulled effortlessly to his feet. The assassin brushed the dust from his clothes. 'You are not bandits, then.'

The stranger barked a laugh. 'No, we are not. I am Leoman, Captain of Sha'ik's Bodyguard. My companion refuses his name to strangers, and we shall leave it at that. We are the two she chose.'

'I must deliver the Book into Sha'ik's hands,' Kalam said. 'Not yours, Leoman.'

The squat warrior – by his colour and clothing a child of this desert – held out the Book. 'By all means.'

Cautiously, the assassin retrieved the heavy, battered tome.

A woman spoke behind him. 'You may now give it to me, Deliverer.'

Kalam slowly closed his eyes, struggling to gather the frayed ends of his nerves. He turned.

There could be no doubting. The small, honey-skinned woman standing before him radiated power in waves, the smell of dust and sand whipped by winds, the taste of salt and blood. Her rather plain face was deeply lined, giving her an appearance of being around forty years old, though Kalam suspected she was younger – Raraku was a harsh home.

Involuntarily, Kalam dropped to one knee. He held out the Book. 'I deliver unto you, Sha'ik, the Apocalypse.' *And with it, a sea of blood – how many innocent lives shattered, to bring hasten down? Hood take me, what have I done?*

The Book's weight left his hands as she accepted it. 'It is damaged.'

The assassin looked up, slowly rose.

Sha'ik was frowning, one finger tracing a torn corner of the leather cover. 'Well, one should not be surprised, given that it is a thousand years old. I thank you, Deliverer. Will you now join my band of soldiers? I sense great talents in you.'

Kalam bowed. 'I cannot. My destiny lies elsewhere.' *Flee, Kalam, before you test the skills of these bodyguards. Flee, before uncertainty kills you.*

Her dark eyes narrowed on his searchingly, then widened. 'I sense something of your desire, though you shield it well. Ride on, then, the way south is open to you. More, you shall have an escort—'

'I need no escort, Seer—'

'But you shall have one in any case.' She gestured and a bulky, ungainly shape appeared from the gloom.

'Holy One,' Leoman hissed warningly.

'You question me?' Sha'ik snapped.

'The Toblakai is as an army, nor are my skills lacking, Holy One, yet—'

'Since I was a child,' Sha'ik cut in, her voice brittle, 'one vision has possessed me above all others. I have seen this moment, Leoman, a thousand times. At dawn I shall open the Book, and the Whirlwind shall

rise, and I shall emerge from it ... renewed. "Blades in hands and unhanded in wisdom," such are the wind's words. Young, yet old. One life whole, another incomplete. I *have seen*, Leoman!' She paused, drew a breath. 'I see no other future but this one. We are safe.' Sha'ik faced Kalam again. 'I acquired a ... a pet recently, which I now send with you, for I sense ... possibilities in you, Deliverer.' She gestured again.

The huge, ungainly shape moved closer and Kalam took an involuntary step backward. His stallion voiced a soft squeal and stood trembling.

Leoman spoke. 'An aptorian, Deliverer, from the realm of Shadow. Sent into Raraku by Shadowthrone ... to spy. It belongs to Sha'ik now.'

The beast was a nightmare, close to nine feet tall, crouching on two thin hind limbs. A lone foreleg, long and multijointed, jutted down from its strangely bifurcated chest. From a hunched, angular shoulder blade, the demon's sinuous neck rose to a flat, elongated head. Needle fangs ridged its jawline, which was swept back and naturally grinning like a dolphin's. Head, neck and limbs were black, while its torso was a dun grey. A single, flat black eye regarded Kalam with appalling awareness.

The assassin saw barely healed scarring on the demon. 'It's been in a fight?'

Sha'ik scowled. 'A D'ivers. Desert wolves. She drove them off—'

'More like a tactical withdrawal,' Leoman added dryly. 'The beast does not eat or drink, so far as we've seen. And though the Holy One believes otherwise, it appears to be entirely brainless – that look in its eye is likely a mask hiding very little.'

'Leoman plagues me with doubts,' Sha'ik said. 'It is his chosen task and I grow increasingly weary of it.'

'Doubts are healthy,' Kalam said, then snapped his mouth shut.

The Holy One only smiled. 'I sensed you two were alike. Leave us, then. The Seven Holies know, one Leoman is enough.'

With a final glance at the young Toblakai, the assassin vaulted back into the saddle, swung the stallion to the south trail and nudged him into a trot.

The aptorian evidently preferred some distance between them; it moved parallel to Kalam at over twenty paces away, a darker stain in the night, striding awkwardly yet silently on its three bony legs.

After ten minutes of riding at a fast trot, the assassin slowed the stallion to a walk. He had delivered the Book, personally seen to the rise of the Whirlwind. Answered his blood's call, no matter how stained the motivation.

The demands of his other life lay ahead. He would kill the Empress, to save the Empire. If he succeeded, Sha'ik's rebellion was doomed. Control would be restored. *And if I fail, they will bleed each other to exhaustion, Sha'ik and Laseen, two women of the same cloth – Hood, they even looked alike.* It was not a far reach, then, for Kalam to see in his shadow a hundred thousand deaths. And he wondered if, throughout Seven Cities, readers of the Deck of Dragons now held a newly awakened Herald of Death in their trembling hands.

Queen's blessing, it's done.

Minutes before dawn, Sha'ik sat down cross-legged before the Book of the Apocalypse. Her two guards flanked her, each in the ruins of a watchtower. The Toblakai youth leaned on his two-handed ironwood sword. A battered bronze helmet missing a cheek-guard was on his head, his eyes hidden in the shadow of a slitted half-visor. His companion's arms were crossed. A crossbow leaned against one hide-wrapped leg. Two one-handed morning stars were thrust through his broad leather belt. He wore a colourless telaba scarf over a peaked iron helm. Below it, his smooth-shaven face showed, latticed by thirty years of sun and wind. His light-blue eyes were ever restless.

The dawn's rays swept over Sha'ik. The Holy One reached down and opened the Book.

The quarrel struck her forehead an inch above her left eye. The iron head shattered the bone, plunging inward a moment before the spring-driven barbs opened like a deadly flower inside her brain. The quarrel's head then struck the inside of the back of her skull, exiting explosively.

Sha'ik toppled.

Tene Baralta bellowed and watched with satisfaction as Aralt Arpat and Lostara Yil led the twelve Red Blades in a charge towards the two hapless bodyguards.

The desert warrior had dropped and rolled a moment after Sha'ik's death. The crossbow now in his hands bucked. Aralt Arpat's chest visibly caved inward as the quarrel drove through his breastbone. The tall sergeant was knocked backward, sprawling in the dust.

The commander bellowed in fury, drew his tulwars and joined the attack.

Lostara's squad threw lances in staggered succession when but fifteen paces from the Toblakai.

Tene Baralta's eyes widened in astonishment as not one of the six lances struck home. Impossibly lithe for one of such bulk, the Toblakai seemed to simply step through them, shifting weight and dipping a shoulder before springing to close, his archaic wooden sword sweeping across in a backswing that connected with the leading Red Blade's knees. The man went down in a cloud of dust, both legs shattered.

Then the Toblakai was in the squad's midst. As Tene Baralta sprinted to reach them, he saw Lostara Yil reel back, blood spraying from her head, her helmet spinning away to bounce across the potsherd gravel. A second soldier fell, his throat crushed by a thrust from the wooden sword.

Arpat's squad attacked the desert warrior. Chains snapped as the morning stars lashed out and struck with deadly accuracy. There was no more difficult a weapon to parry than a morning star – the chain wrapped over any block, sending the iron ball unimpeded to its target. The weapon's greatest drawback was that it was slow to recover, but in the instant that Tene Baralta glanced over to gauge the battle, he saw that the desert warrior

fought equally well with either hand, and was staggering his attacks, resulting in a perpetual sequence of blows that none of the soldiers facing him could penetrate. A helmed head crumpled under the impact in the momentary span of the commander's glance.

In an instant Tene Baralta's tactics shifted. Sha'ik was dead. The mission was a success – there would be no Whirlwind. It was pointless throwing lives away against these two appalling executioners – who had, after all, failed in guarding Sha'ik's life and now sought naught but vengeance. He barked out the recall, and watched as his soldiers battled to extricate themselves from the two men. The effort proved costly, as three more fell before the remaining fighters cleared a space in which to turn and run.

Two of Lostara Yil's soldiers were loyal enough to drag the dazed sergeant with them in their retreat.

Bristling at the sight of the routed Red Blades, Tene Baralta swallowed down a stream of bitter curses. Tulwars held out, he shielded the soldiers' withdrawal, his nerves on fire at the thought of either bodyguard accepting the challenge.

But the two men did not pursue, resuming their positions at the watchtowers. The desert warrior crouched to reload his crossbow.

The sight of the weapon readied was the last Tene Baralta had of the two killers, as the commander then ducked out of sight and jogged with his soldiers back to the small canyon where the horses were tethered.

In the high-walled arroyo, the Red Blades stationed their lone surviving crossbowman on the south-facing crest, then paused to staunch wounds and regain their breaths. Behind them, their horses nickered at the smell of blood. A soldier splashed water on Lostara's red-smeared face. She blinked, awareness slowly returning to her eyes.

Tene Baralta scowled down at her. 'Recover yourself, Sergeant,' he growled. 'You are to regain Kalam's trail – at a safe distance.'

She nodded, reaching up to probe the gash on her forehead. 'That sword was *wood.'*

'Yet as hard as steel, aye. Hood take the Toblakai – and the other one at that. We'll leave them be.'

A slightly wry expression coming to her face, Lostara Yil simply nodded again.

Tene reached down a gauntleted hand and pulled the sergeant to her feet. 'A fine shot, Lostara Yil. You killed the god-cursed witch and all that went with her. The Empress shall be pleased. More than pleased.'

Weaving slightly, Lostara went to her horse, pulled herself into the saddle.

'We ride to Pan'potsun,' Tene Baralta told her. 'To spread the word,' he added with a dark grin. 'Do not lose Kalam, Sergeant.'

'I've yet to fail in that,' she said.

You know I'll count these losses as yours, don't you! Too clever, lass.

He watched her ride away, then swung his glare on his remaining soldiers. 'Cowards! Lucky for you that I guarded your retreat. Mount up.'

Leoman laid out the blanket on the flat ground between the two watchtower foundations, and rolled Sha'ik's linen-wrapped body onto it. He knelt beside it a moment, motionless, then wiped grimy sweat from his brow.

The Toblakai stood nearby. 'She is dead.'

'I see that,' Leoman said dryly, reaching to collect the blood-spattered Book, which he slowly rewrapped in cloth.

'What do we do now?'

'She opened the Book. It was dawn.'

'Nothing happened, except a quarrel going through her head.'

'Damn you, I *know!'*

The Toblakai crossed his massive arms, fell silent.

'The prophecy was certain,' Leoman said after a few minutes. He rose, wincing at his battle-stiffened muscles.

'What do we do now?' the young giant asked again.

'She said she would be ... renewed ...' He sighed, the Book heavy in his hands. 'We wait.'

The Toblakai raised his head, sniffed. 'There's a storm coming.'

Book Two



Whirlwind

I have walked old roads
This day
That became ghosts with
Coming night
And were gone to my eyes
With dawn.
Such was my journey
Leagues across centuries
In one blink of the sun

Pardu epitaph

CHAPTER SIX

> Early in Kellanved's reign, cults proliferated among the Imperial armies, particularly among the Marines. It should be remembered that this was also the time of Dassem Ultor, First Sword and Supreme Commander of the Malazan forces ... a man sworn to Hood ...
>
> *Malazan Campaigns,* vol. II
> Duiker

Beneth sat at his table in Bula's, cleaning his nails with a dagger. They were immaculate, making the habit an affectation. Felisin had grown familiar with his poses and what they betrayed of his moods. The man was in a rage, shot through with fear. Uncertainties now plagued his life; like bloodily larvae they crawled beneath his skin, growing as they gnawed on his flesh.

His face, his forehead and his thick, scarred wrists all glistened with sweat. The pewter mug of chilled Saltoan wine sat untouched on the battered tabletop, a row of flies marching round and round the mug's rim.

Felisin stared at the tiny black insects, memories of horror returning to her. Hood's acolyte, who was not there. A man-shaped swarm of Death's sprites, the buzz of wings shaping words...

'There's light in your eyes again, lass,' Beneth said. 'Tells me you're realizing what you've become. An ugly light.' He pushed a small leather pouch across the table until it sat directly before her. 'Kill it.'

Her hand trembled as she reached for the bag, loosened the ties and removed a button of durhang.

He watched her crumbling the moist pollen into her pipe bowl.

Six days, and Baudin was still missing. Captain Sawark had called in Beneth more than once. Skullcup was very nearly dismantled during the search, patrols on Beetle Road up on the rim were doubled – *round and round* – and Sinker Lake was dredged. It was as if the man had simply vanished.

Beneth took it personally. His control of Skullcup was compromised. He'd called her back to his side, not out of compassion, but because he no longer trusted her. She knew something – something about Baudin – and worse, he knew she was more than she pretended to be.

Beneth and Sawark have spoken, Heboric said the day she'd left – when his ministrations had done enough to allow her to fake a well-being sufficient to justify her leaving. Be *careful, lass. Beneth is taking you back, but only to personally oversee your destruction. What was haphazard before is now precise, deliberate. He's been given guidelines.*

How do you know any of this?

True, I'm just guessing. But Baudin's escape has given Beneth leverage over Sawark, and he's likely to have used it to get the inside story on you. Sawark's granted him more control – there won't be another Baudin – neither man can afford it. Sawark has no choice but to give Beneth more control. . . more knowledge . . .

The durhang tea had given her relief from the pain of her fractured ribs and her swollen jaw, but it had not been potent enough to dull her thoughts. Minute by minute, she'd felt her mind drag her ever closer to desperation. Leaving Heboric had been a flight, her journey back to Beneth a panicked necessity.

He smiled as she set flame to the durhang.

'Baudin wasn't just a dockside thug, was he?'

She frowned at him through a haze of smoke.

Beneth set the dagger down and gave it a spin. They both watched the blade's flashing turns. When it ceased, the point faced Beneth. He scowled, spun it a second time. As the point slowed to face him again he picked up

the dagger and slid it back into the sheath at his belt, then reached for the pewter mug.

The flies scattered as he raised the mug to his lips.

'I don't know anything about Baudin,' Felisin said.

His deep-set eyes studied her for a long moment. 'You haven't figured anything out about anything, have you? Which makes you either thick ... or wilfully ignorant.'

She said nothing. A numbness was spreading through her.

'Was it me, lass? Was it so much of a surrender becoming mine? I wanted you, Felisin. You were beautiful. Sharp – I could see that in your eyes. Am I to blame for you, now?'

He saw her glance down at the pouch on the table and offered up a wry smile. 'Orders are orders. Besides, you could have said no.'

'At any time,' she said, looking away.

'Ah, not my fault, then.'

'No,' she replied, 'the faults are all mine, Beneth.'

Abruptly he rose. 'There's nothing pleasant in the air tonight. The She'gai's begun – the hot wind – all your suffering until now has just been a prelude, lass. Summer begins with the She'gai. But tonight...' He stared down at her but did not finish the sentence, simply taking her by the arm and pulling her upright. 'Walk with me.'

Beneth had been granted the right to form a militia, consisting of his chosen slaves, each now armed with a clout. Throughout the night they patrolled the makeshift streets of Skullcup. The curfew's restriction would now be punctuated with beating followed by execution for anyone caught out in the open after nightfall. The guards would handle the execution – Beneth's militia took their pleasure in the beating.

Beneth and Felisin joined the patrol squad, half a dozen men she knew well, as Beneth had bought their loyalty with her body. 'If it's a quiet night,'

he promised them, 'we'll take time for some relaxation come the dawn.' The men grinned at that.

They walked the littered aisles of sand, watchful but seeing no-one else. Coming opposite a gambling establishment called Suruk's, they saw a crowd of Dosii guardsmen. The Dosii captain, Gunnip, was with them. Their night-hooded gazes followed the patrol as it continued on.

Beneth hesitated, as if of a mind to speak with Gunnip, then, with a loud sigh through his nostrils, resumed walking. One hand reached up to rest on the pommel of his knife.

Felisin became dully aware of something, as if the hot wind breathed a new menace into the night air. The chatter of the militiamen, she noted, had fallen away, and signs of nervousness were evident. She extracted another button of durhang and popped it into her mouth, where it rested cool and sweet between cheek and gum.

'Watching you do that,' Beneth muttered, 'reminds me of Sawark.'

She blinked. 'Sawark?'

'Aye. The worse things get, the more he shuts his eyes.'

Her words came out slurred. 'And what things are getting worse?'

As if in answer, a shout followed by harsh laughter sounded behind them, coming from the front of Suruk's. Beneth halted his men with a gesture, then walked back to the crossroads they had just passed. From there he could see Suruk's – and Gunnip's soldiers.

Like a wraith rising up and stealing through Beneth, tension slowly filled the man's posture. As she watched, vague alarms rang in Felisin's skull. She hesitated, then turned to the militiamen. 'Something's happened. Go to him.'

They were watching as well. One of them scowled, one hand sliding skittish along his belt to the clout. 'He ain't gived us no orders,' he growled. The others nodded, fidgeting as they waited in the shadows.

'He's standing alone,' she said. 'Out in the open. I think there's arrows trained on him—'

'Shut your face, girl,' the militiaman snapped. 'We ain't going out there.'

Beneth almost backed up a step, then visibly steeled himself.

'They're coming for him,' Felisin hissed.

Gunnip and his Dosii soldiers wandered into view, closing a half-circle around Beneth. Cocked crossbows resting on forearms pointed towards him.

Felisin spun to the militiamen. 'Back him up, damn you!'

'Hood take you!' one of the men spat back. The patrol was scattering, slipping back into the shadows and then into the dark alleyways beyond.

'You all alone back there, lass?' Captain Gunnip called out. His soldiers laughed. 'Come join Beneth here. We're just telling him some things, that's all. No worry, lass.'

Beneth turned to speak to her. A Dosii guardsman stepped up and struck him across the face with a gauntleted hand. Beneth staggered, swearing as he brought his hands up to his shattered nose.

Felisin stumbled backward, then twisted and ran, even as crossbows thudded. Quarrels whipped past her on either side as she plunged into an alley mouth. Laughter echoed behind her.

She ran on, the alley paralleling Rust Ramp. A hundred paces ahead waited Darkhall and the barracks. She was out of breath when she stumbled into the open area surrounding the two Malazan buildings, her heart hammering in her chest as if she was fifty years old, not fifteen. Slowly, the shock of seeing Beneth struck down spread through her.

Voices shouted from behind the barracks. Horse hooves pounded. A score of slaves appeared, running towards where Felisin stood with a half-hundred mounted Dosii soldiers behind them. Lances took some men in the back, driving them down into the dust. Unarmed, the slaves tried to flee, but the Dosii had now completed the encirclement. Belatedly, Felisin realized that escape had been denied her as well.

I saw Beneth bleed. From that thought followed another. *Now we die.*

The Dosii horses trampled men and women. Tulwars swung down. In hopeless silence, the slaves were dying. Two riders closed in on Felisin. She watched, wondering which of them would reach her first. One gripped a lance, angled down to take her in the chest. The other held his wide-bladed sword high, readied for a downward chop. In their faces she saw flushed joy and was surprised at the inhumanity of the expression.

When they were both but moments away, quarrels thudded into their chests. Reeling, both men toppled from the saddles. Felisin turned to see a troop of Malazan crossbowmen advancing in formation, the front line kneeling to reload while the second line slipped a few paces ahead, took aim, then as one loosed quarrels into the milling Dosii horsemen. Animals and men screamed in pain.

A third volley broke the Dosii, scattering them back into the darkness beyond the barracks.

A handful of slaves still lived. A sergeant barked an order and a dozen soldiers moved forward, checking the bodies littering the area, then pushing the survivors back towards the troop's position.

'Come with me,' a voice hissed beside Felisin.

She blinked, slow to recognize Pella's face. 'What?'

'We're quartering the slaves at the stables – but not you.' He gently took her arm. 'We're badly outnumbered. Defending slaves isn't a high priority, I'm afraid. Sawark wants this mutiny crushed. Tonight.'

She studied his face. 'What are you saying?'

The sergeant had pulled his troop into a more defensible position at an alley mouth. The twelve detached soldiers were pushing the slaves down the side street that led to the stables. Pella guided Felisin in the same direction. Once out of sight of the sergeant, he addressed the other soldiers. "Three of you, with me.'

One replied, 'Has Oponn stirred your brains, Pella? I don't feel safe as it is, and you want to split the squad?'

Another growled, 'Let's just get rid of these damned slaves and get back, afore the sergeant marches to rejoin the captain.'

'This is Beneth's woman,' Pella said.

'I don't think Beneth is still alive,' Felisin said dully.

'He was not five minutes ago, lass,' Pella said, frowning. 'Bloodied a bit, nothing more. He's rallying his militia right now.' He swung to the others. 'We'll need Beneth, Reborid, never mind Sawark's bluster. Now, three of you – we're not going far.'

With a scowl, the one named Reborid gestured to two others.

A fire had been started in Skullcup's western arm – somewhere on Spit Row. Unchecked, it was spreading fast, throwing a lurid orange glow up against the underbellies of billowing smoke.

As Pella dragged Felisin along, Reborid talked unceasingly. 'Where in Hood's name is the Be'thra Garrison? You think they can't see the flames? There were Malazan squads up patrolling Beetle Road – a rider would have been sent – the troop should be here by now, dammit.'

There were bodies in the streets, huddled, motionless shapes. The small party went around them without pause.

'Hood knows what Gunnip's thinking,' the soldier went on. 'Sawark will see every damn Dosii within fifty leagues of here gutted and left out under the sun.'

'This is the place,' Pella said, tugging Felisin to a halt. 'Defensive position,' he ordered the others. 'I'll be but a moment.'

They were at Heboric's house. No light leaked from the shutters. The door was locked. Snorting with disgust, Pella kicked the flimsy barrier aside. His hand against her back, he pushed her into the darkness within, then followed.

'There's no-one here,' Felisin said.

Pella did not reply, still pushing her along, until they reached the cloth divider behind which was the ex-priest's bedroom. 'Pull it aside, Felisin.'

She did, stepping into the small room. Pella followed.

Heboric sat on his cot, staring up at them in silence.

'I wasn't sure,' Pella said in a low voice, 'if you still wanted her along.'

The ex-priest grunted. 'What of you, Pella? We might manage—'

'No. Take her instead. I've got to rejoin the captain – we'll crush this mutiny – but the timing's perfect for you ...'

Heboric sighed. 'Aye, that it is. Fener's grunt, Baudin, step out of them shadows. This lad's no risk to us,'

Pella started as a massive shape separated itself from behind the hanging. Baudin's narrow-set eyes glittered in the dimness. He said nothing.

Shaking himself, Pella stepped back to the entrance, gripping the grimy cloth with one hand. 'Fener guard you, Heboric'

'Thank you, lad. For everything.'

Pella gave a curt nod, then was gone.

Felisin frowned at Baudin. 'You're wet.'

Heboric rose. 'Is all ready?' he asked Baudin.

The big man nodded.

'Are we escaping?' Felisin asked.

'Aye.'

'How?'

Heboric scowled. 'You'll see soon enough.'

Baudin picked up two large leather packs from behind him, and tossed one effortlessly to Heboric, who trapped it deftly between his arms. The sound the pack made when the ex-priest caught it made it obvious to Felisin

that it was in fact a sealed bladder, filled with air. 'We're going to swim Sinker Lake,' she said. 'Why? There's nothing but a sheer cliff on the other side.'

'There's caves,' Heboric said. 'You can reach them when the water level's low ... ask Baudin, since he's been hiding in one for a week.'

'We have to take Beneth,' Felisin pronounced.

'Now, lass—'

'No! You owe me – both of you! You wouldn't be alive to even do this, Heboric, if it wasn't for me. And for Beneth. I'll find him, meet you at the lakeshore—'

'No, you won't,' Baudin said. 'I'll get him.' He handed Felisin the bladder.

She watched him slip out through a back door she hadn't known was there, then slowly turned to regard Heboric. He was crouched down, examining the loose netting wrapped around the packs. 'I wasn't part of your escape plan, was I, Heboric?'

He glanced up, raised his brows. 'Until tonight, it seemed you'd made Skullcup your paradise. I didn't think you'd be interested in leaving.'

'Paradise?' For some reason the word shook her. She sat down on the cot.

Eyeing her, he shrugged. 'Beneth provided.'

She held his gaze until, after a long moment, he finally pulled away, hefting the pack as he rose with a grunt. 'We should get going,' he said gruffly.

'I'm not much in your eyes any more, am I, Heboric? Was I ever?' *Felisin, House of Paran, whose sister was Adjunct Tavore, whose brother rode with Adjunct Lorn. noble-born, a spoiled little girl. A whore.*

He did not reply, making his way to the gap in the back wall.

The western half of Skullcup was in flames, lighting the entire bowl a grainy, wavering red. Heboric and Felisin saw evidence of clashes as they hurried down Work Road towards the lake – downed horses, dead Malazan and Dosii guards. Bula's Inn had been barricaded, then the barriers breached. From the darkness of the doorway, as they passed, came a faint moaning.

Felisin hesitated, but Heboric hooked her arm. 'You don't want to go in there, lass,' he said. 'Gunnip's men hit that place early on, and hard.'

Beyond the town's edge, Work Road stretched empty and dark all the way to the Three Fates fork. Through the rushes on their left was the glimmer of Sinker Lake's placid surface.

The ex-priest led her down into the grasses, bade her crouch down, then did the same. 'We'll wait here,' he said, wiping sweat from his wide, tattooed forehead.

The mud under her knees was clammy, pleasantly cool. 'So we swim to the cave ... then what?'

'It's an old mineshaft, leading up beyond the rim, well past Beetle Road. There will be supplies left for us at the other end. From there, it's out across the desert.'

'Dosin Pali?'

He shook his head. 'Straight west, to the inside coast. Nine, ten days. There's hidden springs – Baudin has memorized their locations. We'll get picked up by a boat and taken across to the mainland.'

'How? Who?'

The ex-priest grimaced. 'An old friend with more loyalty than is probably good for him. Hood knows, I'm not complaining.'

'And Pella was the contact?'

'Aye, some obscure connection to do with friends of fathers and uncles and friends of friends or something like that. He first approached you, you know, but you didn't catch on. So he found me himself.'

'I don't remember anything like that.'

'A quote, attributed to Kellanved and recorded by the man arranging our escape – Duiker.'

'A familiar name ...'

'The Imperial Historian. He spoke on my behalf at the trial. Then, afterwards, arranged to be sent to Hissar by warren.' He fell silent, slowly shook his head. 'To save a bitter old man who more than once denounced his written histories as deliberate lies. If I live to stand face to face with Duiker, I think I owe the man an apology.'

A buzzing, frenzied sound reached them, coming from the smoky air above the town. The sound grew louder. Sinker Lake's smooth surface vanished beneath what seemed a spray of hailstones.

Felisin crouched lower in fear. 'What is it? What's happening?'

Heboric was silent a moment, then he hissed, 'Bloodflies! Drawn, then driven, by the fires. Quickly, lass, scoop up mud – cover yourself! And then me. Hurry!'

Glittering clouds of the insects swept into view, racing like gusts of fog.

Frantic, Felisin dug her fingers into the cool mud between the reed stems, slapping handfuls against her neck, arms, face. As she worked she crawled forward on her knees until she sat in the lake water, then she turned to Heboric. 'Come closer!'

He scrambled to her side. 'They'll dive through the water, girl – you need to get out of there – cover your legs in mud!'

'Once I'm done with you,' she said.

But it was too late. All at once the air was almost unbreathable as a cloud engulfed them. Bloodflies shot down into the water like darts. Pain lanced through her thighs.

Heboric pushed her hands away, then ducked down. 'Mind yourself, lass!'

The command was unnecessary, as all thoughts of helping Heboric had vanished with the first savage bite. Felisin leapt from the water, clawed gouges of mud free and slapped them down on her blood-smeared thighs. She quickly added more down to her calves, her ankles and feet. Insects crawled through her hair. Whimpering, she clawed them away, then covered her head with mud. Bloodflies rode her drawn gasps into her mouth, biting as she gagged and spat. She found herself biting down, crunching them, and their bitter juices burned like acid. They were everywhere, blinding her as they gathered in frenzied clumps around her eyes. Screaming, she scraped them away, then reached down and found more mud. Soothing darkness, yet her screaming did not stop, would not stop. The insects were at her ears. She filled them with mud. Silence.

Handless arms wrapped tight around her, Heboric's voice reaching her as if from a great distance away. 'It's all right, lass – it's all right. You can stop screaming, Felisin. You can stop.'

She had curled into a ball amidst the reeds. The pain of the bites was passing to numbness – on her legs, around her eyes and ears, and in her mouth. Cool, soft numbness. She heard herself fall silent.

'The swarm's passing,' Heboric said. 'Fener's blessing too fierce a touch for them. We're all right, lass. Wipe clear your eyes – see for yourself.'

She made no move. It was too easy to lie still, the numbness spreading through her.

'Wake up!' Heboric snapped. 'There's an egg in every bite, each secreting a poison that deadens, turns your flesh into something soft. And dead. Food for the larvae inside those eggs. You understanding me, lass? We need to kill those eggs – I've a tincture, in the pouch at my belt – but you'll need to apply it yourself, right? An old man without hands can't do it for you—'

She moaned.

'Wake up, damn you!'

He struck her, pushed, then kicked. Cursing, Felisin sat up. 'Stop it, I'm awake!' Her words slurred passing through her numbed mouth. 'Where is

that pouch?'

'Here. Open your eyes!'

She could barely see through the puffed swelling, but a strange blue penumbra rising from Heboric's tattoos illuminated the scene. He was unbitten. *Fener's blessing too fierce a touch.*

He gestured at the pouch at his belt. 'Quickly, those eggs are about to hatch, then the larvae will start eating you – from the inside out. Open the pouch ... there, the black bottle, the small one. Open it!'

She removed the stopper. A bitter smell made her recoil.

'One drop, on your fingertip, then push that drop right into the wound, push it hard. Then the next one and the next—'

'I – I can't feel the ones around my eyes—'

'I'll guide you, lass. Hurry.'

The horror did not end. The tincture, a foul, dark-brown juice that stained her skin yellow, did not kill the emerging larvae, but drove them out. Heboric directed her hands to the ones around her eyes and ears as each sluggishly wriggled free, and she plucked them from the holes made by the bites, each larva as long as a nail clipping, limp with the soporific effect of the tincture. The bites she could see illustrated what was happening around her eyes and ears. In her mouth, the tincture's bitterness overrode the bloodfly larvae's poison, making her head spin and her heart beat alarmingly fast. The larvae fell like grains of rice onto her tongue. She spat them out.

'I'm sorry, Felisin,' Heboric said after she had done. He was examining the bites around her eyes, his expression filled with compassion.

A chill ran through her. 'What's wrong? Will I go blind? Deaf? What is it, Heboric!'

He shook his head, slowly sat back. 'Bloodfly bites ... the deadening poison kills the flesh. You'll heal, but there will be pockmarks. I'm so sorry, lass. It's bad around your eyes. It's bad.. .'

She almost laughed, her head reeling. Another shiver rippled through her and she hugged herself. 'I've seen those. Locals. Slaves. Here and there—'

'Aye. Normally, bloodflies don't swarm. It must have been the flames. Now listen, a good enough healer – someone with High Denul – can remove the scarring. We'll find ourselves such a healer, Felisin. I swear it, by Fener's tusks, I swear it.'

'I feel sick.'

'That's the tincture. Rapid heart, chills, nausea. It's the juice of a plant native to Seven Cities. If you drank down what's left in that tiny bottle you'd be dead in minutes.'

This time she did laugh, the sound shaky and brittle. 'I might welcome Hood's Gates, Heboric' She squinted at him. The blue glow was fading. 'Fener must be very forgiving.'

He frowned at that. 'I can make no sense of it, to be honest. I can think of more than one High Priest to Fener who'd choke at the suggestion that the boar god was ... forgiving.' He sighed. 'But it seems you're right.'

'You might want to offer thanks. A sacrifice.'

'I might,' he growled, looking away.

'It must have been a great offence that drove you from your god, Heboric.'

He did not reply. After a moment he rose, eyes on the flame-wracked town. 'Riders coming.'

She sat up straighter, still too dizzy to stand. 'Beneth?'

He shook his head.

Moments later a troop of Malazans rode up, halting directly opposite Heboric and Felisin. At the head was Captain Sawark. A Dosii blade had laid open one cheek. His uniform was wet and dark with blood. Felisin involuntarily shrank back from his cold lizard eyes as they fixed on her.

He finally spoke, 'When you're up on the rim . . . look south.'

Heboric cursed softly in surprise. 'You're letting us go? Thank you, Captain.'

His face darkened. 'Not for you, old man. It's seditious bastards like you that are the cause of all this. I'd rather spit you on a spear right now.' He made as if to say something more, his eyes finding Felisin once again, but instead he simply reined his mount around.

The two fugitives watched the troop ride back into Skullcup. They were heading for a battle. Felisin knew this instinctively. Another sourceless certainty told her, in a whisper, that they would all die. Captain Sawark. Pella. Every Malazan. She glanced over at Heboric. The man looked thoughtful as he watched the troop reach the edge of town, then vanish into the smoke.

A moment later Baudin rose from a bed of reeds nearby.

Felisin clambered to her feet and stepped towards him. 'Where's Beneth?'

'Dead, lass.'

'You – you...' Her words were drowned out in a flood of pain rising up within her, an anguish more thorough in shattering her than anything she'd yet suffered. She staggered back a step.

Baudin's small, flat eyes held steady on her.

Heboric cleared his throat. 'We'd best hurry. Dawn's not far off, and while I doubt our crossing the lake is likely to be noticed, there's no point in making our intentions obvious. After all, we're Malazan.' He strode down to the waiting bladders. 'The plan is to wait out the coming day at the other end of the reach, then set out after sunset. Less likely that any roving bands of Dosii will see us.'

Dully, Felisin followed the two men to the lake's edge. Baudin strapped one of the packs against Heboric's chest. Felisin realized she would have to share the other bladder with Baudin. She studied the big man as he checked the netting one last time.

Beneth's dead. So he says. He probably didn't even look for him. Beneth's alive. He must be. Nothing more than a bloodied face. Baudin's lying.

Sinker Lake's water washed the last of the mud and tincture from Felisin's skin. It was not nearly enough.

The cliff face bounced back the echoes of their harsh breaths. Chilled and feeling the water striving to pull her down, Felisin tightened her grip on the netting. 'I see no cave,' she gasped.

Baudin grunted. 'Surprised you can see anything at all,' he said.

She made no reply. The flesh around her eyes had swollen until only slits remained. Her ears felt like slabs of meat, heavy and huge, and the flesh inside her mouth had closed around her teeth. She was having difficulty breathing, constantly clearing her throat without effect. The discomforts left her feeling dislocated, as if she had no vanity left to sting, bringing an almost amused relief.

Surviving this is all that counts. Let Tavore see all the scars she's given me, the day we come face to face. I need say nothing, then, to justify my revenge.

'The opening is under the surface,' Heboric said. 'We need to puncture these bladders and swim down. Baudin will go first, with a rope tied to his waist. Hold on to that rope, lass, else you'll be pulled to the bottom.'

Baudin handed her a dagger, then laid the rope over the bobbing pack. A moment later he pushed himself towards the cliff wall and vanished beneath the lake's surface.

Felisin snatched at the rope, gripping it hard as she watched the coils play out. 'How far down?'

'Seven, eight feet,' Heboric said. 'Then about fifteen feet through the cave until you'll find your next breath. Can you manage it, lass?'

I will have to.

Faint screams drifted across the lake. The burning town's last, pitiful cries. It had happened so swiftly, almost quietly – a single night to bring Skullcup to a bloody end. It didn't seem real.

She felt a tug on the rope.

'Your turn,' Heboric said. 'Puncture the bladder, let it sink away from you, then follow the rope.'

She reversed her grip on the dagger and stabbed down. A gust of air whistled, the pack sagging. Like hands, the water pulled her down. She snatched a frantic breath before slipping under. In a moment the rope no longer led down, but up. She came up against the slick face of the cliff. The dagger fell away as she clutched the rope with both hands and pulled herself along.

The cave mouth was a deeper blackness, the water bitter cold. Already her lungs screamed for air. She felt herself blacking out, but savagely pushed the feeling away. A glimmer of reflected light showed ahead. Kicking out as her mouth filled with water, she clawed her way towards it.

Hands reached down to grip her tunic's hemmed collar and pulled her effortlessly up into air, into light. She lay on hard, cold stone, racked with coughs. An oil-wick lantern glowed beside her head. Beyond it, leaning against the wall, were two wood-framed travel packs and bladders swollen with water.

'You lost my damned knife, didn't you?'

'Hood take you, Baudin.'

He grunted his laugh, then focused his attention on reeling in the rope. Heboric's head broke the black surface moments later. Baudin pulled the ex-priest onto the rock shelf.

'Must be trouble up top,' the big man said. 'Our supplies were brought down here.'

'So I see.' Heboric sat up, gasping as he recovered his breath.

'Best you two stay here while I scout,' Baudin said.

'Aye. Off with you, then.'

As Baudin disappeared up the reach, Felisin sat up. 'What kind of trouble?'

Heboric shrugged.

'No,' she said. 'You've suspicions.'

He grimaced. 'Sawark said, "Look south."'

'So?'

'So just that, lass. Let's wait for Baudin, shall we?'

'I'm cold.'

'We spared no room for extra clothing. Food and water, a few weapons, a fire kit. There's blankets but best keep them dry.'

'They'll dry out soon enough,' she snapped, crawling over to one of the packs.

Baudin returned a few minutes later and crouched down beside Heboric. Shivering under a blanket, Felisin watched the two men. 'No, Baudin,' she said as he prepared to whisper something to the ex-priest, 'loud enough for all of us.'

The big man glanced at Heboric, who shrugged.

'Dosin Pali is thirty leagues away,' Baudin said. 'Yet you can see its glow.'

Heboric frowned. 'Even a firestorm wouldn't be visible at such a distance, Baudin.'

'True enough, and it's no firestorm. It's sorcery, old man. A mage battle.'

'Hood's breath,' Heboric muttered. 'Some battle!'

'It's come,' Baudin growled.

'What has?' Felisin asked.

'Seven Cities has risen, lass. Dryjhna. The Whirlwind's come.'

The hogg boat was all of thirteen feet in length. Duiker paused a long moment before clambering down into it. Six inches of water sloshed beneath the two flat boards that formed the craft's deck. Rags stoppered a score of minor leaks in the hull, with various degrees of efficacy. The smell of rotting fish was almost overwhelming.

Wrapped in his army-issue raincape, Kulp had not moved from where he stood on the dock. 'And what,' he asked tonelessly, 'did you pay for this ... boat?'

The historian sighed, glancing up at the mage. 'Can you not repair it? What was your warren again, Kulp?'

'Boat repair,' the man answered.

'Very well,' Duiker said, climbing back onto the dock. 'I take your point. To cross the Strait you will need something more seaworthy than this. The man who sold me this craft seems to have exaggerated its qualities.'

'A haral's prerogative. Better had you hired a craft.'

Duiker grunted. 'Who could I trust?'

'Now what?'

The historian shrugged. 'Back to the inn. This requires a new plan.'

They made their way up the rickety dock and entered the dirt track that passed for the village's main thoroughfare. The fisher shacks on either side displayed a paucity of pride common to small communities in the shadow of a large city. Dusk had fallen, and apart from a pack of three scrawny dogs taking turns rolling on the carcass of a fish, there was no-one about. Heavy curtains blotted out most of the light coming from the shacks. The air was hot, an inland wind holding at bay the sea breeze.

The village inn stood on stilts, a sprawling, single-storey structure of bleached wood frame, burlap walls and thatched roof. Crabs scuttled in the sand beneath it. Opposite the inn was the stone blockhouse of a Malazan Coastal Guard detachment – four sailors from Cawn and two marines

whose appearance betrayed nothing of their origins. For them, the old national allegiances no longer held any relevance. *The new Imperial breed*, Duiker mused as he and Kulp entered the inn and returned to the table they'd occupied earlier. The Malazan Guards were crowded around another, close to the back wall where the burlap had been pulled aside, revealing the tranquil scene of withered grasses, white sand and glittering sea. Duiker envied the soldiers the fresh air that no doubt drifted in to where they sat.

They'd yet to approach, but the historian knew it was only a matter of time. In this village travellers would be rare, and one wearing the field cape of a soldier even rarer. Thus far, however, translating curiosity into action had proved too great an effort.

Kulp gestured to the barman for a jug of ale, then leaned close to Duiker. 'There's going to be questions. Soon. That's one problem. We don't have a boat. That's another. I'm a poor excuse for a sailor, that's a third—'

'All right, all right,' the historian hissed. 'Hood's breath, let me think in peace!'

His expression sour, Kulp leaned back.

Moths danced clumsily between the sputtering lanterns in the room. There were no villagers present, and the lone barman's attention seemed close to obsessive on the Malazan soldiers, holding his thin, dark eyes on them even as he set down the ale jug in front of Kulp.

Watching the barman leave, the mage grunted. 'This night's passing strange, Duiker.'

'Aye.' *Where is everyone?*

The scrape of a chair drew their attention to the ranking Malazan, a corporal by the sigil on his surcoat, who'd risen and now approached. Beneath the dull tin sigil was a larger stain, where the surcoat's dye was unweathered – the man had once been a sergeant.

To match his frame, the corporal's face was flat and wide, evincing north Kanese blood somewhere in his ancestry. His head was shaved, showing razor scars, some still blotted with dried blood. His gaze was fixed on Kulp.

The mage spoke first. 'Watch your tongue, lest you keep walking backwards.'

The soldier blinked. 'Backwards?'

'Sergeant, then corporal – you bucking for private now? You've been warned.'

The man seemed unaffected. 'I see no rank showing,' he growled.

'Only because you don't know what to look for. Go back to your table, Corporal, and leave our business to us.'

'You're Seventh Army.' He clearly had no intention of returning to his table. 'A deserter.'

Kulp's wiry brows rose. 'Corporal, you've just come face to face with the Seventh's entire Mage Cadre. Now back out of my face before I put gills and scales on yours.'

The corporal's eyes flicked to Duiker, then back to Kulp.

'Wrong,' the mage sighed. *'I'm* the entire cadre. This man's my guest.'

'Gills and scales, huh?' The corporal set his wide hands down on the tabletop and leaned close to Kulp. 'I get even a sniff of you opening a warren, you'll find a knife in your throat. This is my guardpost, magicker, and any business you got here is *my* business. Now, start explaining yourselves, before I cut those big ears off your head and add 'em to my belt. Sir.'

Duiker cleared his throat. 'Before this goes any further—'

'Shut your mouth!' the corporal snapped, still glaring at Kulp.

Distant shouting interrupted them. 'Truth!' the corporal bellowed. 'Go see what's happening outside.'

A young Cawn sailor leapt to his feet, checking a newly issued short sword scabbarded at his hip as he crossed to the door.

'We are here,' Duiker told the corporal, 'to purchase a boat—'

A startled curse came from just outside, followed by a frantic scrabbling of boots on the rickety inn steps. The recruit named Truth tumbled back inside, his face white. An impressive stream of Cawn dockside curses issued from the youth's mouth, finishing with: '- got an armed mob outside, Corporal, and they ain't interested in talking. Saw them split, about ten heading to the *Ripath.'*

The other sailors were on their feet. One addressed the corporal. 'They'll torch her, Gesler, then we'll be stuck on this stinking strip of beach—'

'Arms out and form up,' Gesler growled. He rose, turning to the other marine. 'Front door, Stormy. Find out who's leading that group out there and stick a quarrel between his eyes.'

'We have to save the boat!' the sailors' spokesman said.

Gesler nodded. 'That we will, Vered.'

The marine named Stormy took position at the door, his cocked assault crossbow appearing as if from nowhere. Outside, the shouting had grown louder, closer. The mob was working itself into the courage it needed to rush the inn. The boy Truth stood in the centre of the room, the short sword twitching in his hand, his face red with rage.

'Calm yourself, lad,' Gesler said. His eyes fell to Kulp. 'I'm less likely to cut off your ears if you open a warren now, Mage.'

Duiker asked, 'You've made enemies in this village, Corporal?'

The man smiled. 'This has been coming for some time. *Ripath* is fully provisioned. We can get you to Hissar... maybe ... we got to get out of this first. Can you use a crossbow?'

The historian sighed, then nodded.

'Expect some arrows through the walls,' Stormy said from the doorway.

'Found their leader yet?'

'Aye, and he's keeping his distance.'

'We can't wait – to the back door, everyone!'

The barman, who'd been crouching behind the small counter on one side of the room, now stepped forward, hunched crablike in expectation of the first flight of arrows through the burlap wall. 'The tab, Mezla – many weeks now. Seventy-two jakatas—'

'What's your life worth?' Gesler asked, gesturing for Truth to join the sailors as they slipped through the break in the rear wall.

The barman's eyes went wide, then he ducked his head. 'Seventy-two jakatas, Mezla?'

'About right,' the corporal nodded.

Cool, damp air, smelling of moss and wet stone, filled the room. Duiker looked at Kulp, who mutely shook his head. The historian rose. 'They've got a mage, Corporal—'

A roar rushed from the street outside and struck the front of the inn like a wave. The wooden frame bowed, the burlap walls bellying. Kulp loosed a warning shout, pitching from his chair and rolling across the floor. Wood split, cloth tore.

Stormy lunged away from the front, and all at once everyone left in the room was bolting for the rear exit. The floor lifted under them as the front stilts lost their footing, pitching everyone towards the back wall. Tables and chairs toppled, joining the headlong rush. Screaming, the barman vanished under a rack of wine jugs.

Tumbling through the rent, Duiker fell through the darkness to land on a heap of dried seaweed. Kulp landed on him, all knees and elbows, driving the breath from the historian's lungs.

The inn was still rising from the front as the sorcerous wave took hold of all it touched, and *pushed.*

'Do something, Kulp!' Duiker gasped.

In answer the mage pulled the historian upright, spun him around, then gave him a hard shove. 'Run! That's what we're going to do!'

The sorcery ravaging the inn abruptly ceased. Still balanced on its rear stilts, the building pitched back down. Cross-beams snapped. The inn seemed to explode, the wood frame shattering. The ceiling collapsed straight down, hitting the floor in a cloud of sand and dust.

Stumbling beside Duiker as they hurried down to the beach, Stormy grunted, 'Hood's just paid the barman's tab, eh?' The marine gestured with the crossbow he carried. 'I'm here to take care of you. Corporal's gone ahead – we're looking at a scrap getting to *Ripath's* dock.'

'Where's Kulp?' Duiker demanded. It had all happened so fast, he was feeling overwhelmed with confusion. 'He was here beside me—'

'Gone sniffing after that spell-caster is my guess. Who can figure mages, eh? Unless'n he's run away. Hood knows he ain't showed much so far, eh?'

They reached the strand. Thirty paces to their left Gesler and the sailors were closing in on a dozen locals who'd taken up positions in front of a narrow dock. A low, sleek patrol craft with a single mast was moored there. To the right the beach stretched in a gentle curve southward, to distant Hissar ... a city in flames. Duiker staggered to a halt, staring at the ruddy sky above Hissar.

Togg's teats!' Stormy hissed, following the historian's gaze. 'Dryjhna's come. Guess we won't be taking you to the city after all, eh?'

'Wrong,' Duiker said. 'I need to rejoin Coltaine. My horse is in the stables – never mind the damn boat.'

'They're pinching her flanks right now, I bet. Around here, people ride camels, eat horses. Forget it.' He reached out but the historian pulled away and began running up the strand, away from *Ripath* and the scrap that had now started there.

Stormy hesitated, then, growling a curse, set off after Duiker.

A flash of sorcery ignited the air above the front street, followed by an agonized shriek.

Kulp, Duiker thought. *Delivering or dying.* He stayed on the beach, running parallel to the village, until he judged he was opposite the stables, then he turned inward, scrabbling through the weeds of the tide line. Stormy moved up beside the historian.

'I'll just see you safe on your way, eh?'

'My thanks,' Duiker whispered.

'Who are you anyway?'

'Imperial Historian. And who are you, Stormy?'

The man grunted. 'Nobody. Nobody at all.'

They slowed as they slipped between the first row of huts, keeping to the shadows. A few paces from the street the air blurred in front of them and Kulp appeared. His cape was scorched, his face red from a fireflash.

'Why in Hood's name are you two here?' he demanded in a hiss. 'There's a High Mage out prowling around – Hood knows why he's here. Problem is, he knows I'm here, which makes me bad company to be around – I barely squeezed the last one—'

'That scream we heard was yours?' Duiker asked.

'Ever had a spell roll onto you? My bones have been rattled damn near out of their sockets. I shat my pants, too. But I'm alive.'

'So far,' Stormy said, grinning.

'Thanks for the blessing,' Kulp muttered.

Duiker said, 'We need to—'

The night blossomed around them, a coruscating, flame-lit explosion that flung all three men to the ground. The historian's shriek of pain joined two others as the sorcery seemed to claw into his flesh, clutch icy cold around his bones, sending jolts of agony up his limbs. His scream rose higher as the relentless pain reached his brain, blotting out the world in a blood-misted haze that seemed to sizzle behind his eyes. Duiker thrashed about and rolled

across the ground, but there was no escape. This sorcery was killing him, a horrifyingly personal assault, invading every corner of his being.

Then it was gone. He lay unmoving, one cheek pressed against the cool, dusty ground, his body twitching in the aftermath. He'd soiled himself. He'd pissed himself. His sweat was a bitter stink.

A hand clutched the collar of his telaba. Kulp's breath gusted hot at his ear as the mage whispered, 'I slapped back. Enough to sting. We need to get to the boat – Gesler's—'

'Go with Stormy,' Duiker gasped. 'I'm taking the horses—'

'Are you mad?'

Biting back a scream, the historian pushed himself to his feet. He staggered as memories of pain rippled through his limbs. 'Go with Stormy, damn you – go!'

Kulp stared at the man, then his eyes narrowed. 'Aye, ride as a Dosii. Might work ...'

Stormy, his face white as death, plucked the mage's sleeve. 'Gesler won't wait for ever.'

'Aye.' With a final nod at Duiker, the mage joined the marine. They ran hard back down to the beach.

Gesler and the sailors were in trouble. Bodies lay sprawled in the churned-up sand around the dock – the first dozen locals and two of the Cawn sailors. Gesler, flanked by Truth and another sailor, were struggling to hold at bay a newly arrived score of villagers – men and women – who flung themselves forward in a spitting frenzy, using harpoons, mallets, cleavers, some with only their bare hands. The remaining two sailors – both wounded – were on *Ripath*, feebly attempting to cast off the lines.

Stormy led Kulp to within a dozen paces of the mob, then the marine crouched, took aim and fired a quarrel into the press. Someone shrieked. Stormy slung the crossbow over a shoulder and drew a short sword and gutting dagger. 'Got anything for this, Mage?' he demanded, then, without

waiting for a reply, he plunged forward, striking the mob on its flank. Villagers reeled; none was killed, but many were horribly maimed as the marine waded into the press – the dead posed no burden; the wounded did.

Gesler now held the dock alone, as Truth was pulling a downed comrade back towards the boat. One of the wounded sailors on *Ripath's* deck had stopped moving.

Kulp hesitated, knowing that whatever sorcery he unleashed would draw down on them the High Mage. The cadre mage did not think it likely that he could withstand another attack. All his joints were bleeding inside, swelling the flesh with blood. By the morning he would not be able to move. *If I survive this night.* Even so, more subtle ploys remained.

Kulp raised his arms, voicing a keening shriek. A wall of fire erupted in front of him, then rolled, tumbling and growing, rushing towards the villagers. Who broke, then ran. Kulp sent the flame up the beach in pursuit. When it reached the banked sward, it vanished.

Stormy whirled. 'If you could do that—'

'It was nothing,' Kulp said, joining the men.

'A wall of—'

'I meant *nothing! A* Hood-blinked illusion, you fool! Now, let's get out of here!'

They lost Vered twenty spans from the shore, a harpoon-head buried deep in his chest finally gushing the last of his blood onto the slick deck. Gesler unceremoniously rolled the man over the side. Remaining upright in addition to the corporal were the youth Truth, Stormy and Kulp. Another sailor was slowly losing a battle with a slashed artery in his left thigh and was but minutes from Hood's Gate.

'Everyone stay quiet,' Kulp whispered. 'Show no lights – the High Mage is on the beach.'

Breaths were held, including a pitiless hand clamped down over the dying sailor's mouth until the man's moaning ceased.

With barely a storm-sail rigged, *Ripath* slipped slowly from the shallow bay, her keel parting water with a soft susurration.

Loud enough, Kulp knew. He opened his warren, threw sounds in random directions, a muted voice here, a creak of wood there. He cast a shroud of gloom over the area, holding the power of his warren back, letting it trickle forth to deceive, not challenge.

Sorcery flashed sixty spans to their left, fooled by a thrown sound. The gloom swallowed the magic's light.

The night fell silent once again. Gesler and others seemed to grasp what Kulp was doing. Their eyes held on him, hopeful, with barely checked fear. Truth held the tiller, motionless, not daring to do anything but keep the sail ahead of the soft breeze.

It seemed they merely crawled on the water. Sweat dripped from Kulp – he was soaked through with the effort of evading the High Mage's questing senses. He could feel those deadly probes, only now realizing that his opponent was a woman, not a man.

Far to the south, Hissar's harbour was a glowing wall of black-smeared flames. No effort was made to angle towards it, and Kulp understood as well as the others that there would be no succour found there. Seven Cities had risen in mutiny.

And we're at sea. Is there a safe harbour left to us? Gesler said this boat was provisioned – far enough to *take us to Aren? Through hostile waters at that...* A better option would be Falar, but that was over six hundred leagues south of Dosin Pali.

Then another thought struck him, even as the questing of the High Mage faded, then finally vanished. *Heboric light Touch — the poor bastard's heading for the rendezvous if all's gone as planned.* Crossing *a desert to a lifeless coast.* 'Breathe easy now,' the mage said. 'She's abandoned the hunt.'

'Out of range?' Truth asked.

'No, just lost interest. I'd guess she has more important matters to attend to, lad. Corporal Gesler.'

'Aye?'

'We need to cross the strait. To the Otataral Coast.'

'What in Hood's name for, Mage?'

'Sorry, this time I'm pulling rank. Do as I command.'

'And what if we just push you over the side?' Gesler enquired calmly. 'There's dhenrabi out here, feeding along the edge of Sahul Shelf. You'd be a tasty morsel...'

Kulp sighed. 'We go to pick up a High Priest of Fener, Corporal. Feed me to a dhenrabi and no-one mourns the loss. Anger a High Priest and his foul-tempered god might well cock one red eye in your direction. Are you prepared for that risk?'

The corporal leaned back and barked a laugh. Stormy and Truth were grinning as well.

Kulp scowled. 'You find this amusing?'

Stormy leaned over the gunnel and spat into the sea. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then said, 'It seems Fener's already cocked an eye in our direction, Mage. We're Boar Company, of the disbanded First Army. Before Laseen crushed the cult, that is. Now we're just marines attached to a miserable Coastal Guard.'

'Ain't stopped us from following Fener, Mage,' Gesler said. 'Or even recruiting new followers to the warrior cult,' he added, nodding towards Truth. 'So just point the way – Otataral Coast, you said. Angle her due east, lad, and let's get this sail up and ready the spinnaker for the morning winds.'

Slowly, Kulp sat back. 'Anyone else need to wash out their leggings?' he asked.

Wrapped in his telaba, Duiker rode from the village. There were figures to either side of the coastal road, featureless in the faint moon's light. The cool desert air seemed to carry in it the residue of a sandstorm, a desiccating

haze that parched the throat. Reaching the crossroads, the historian reined in. Southward the coastal road continued on, down to Hissar. A trader track led west, inland. A quarter-mile down this track was encamped an army.

There was no order evident. Thousands of tents were haphazardly pitched around a huge central corral shrouded in fire-lit clouds of dust. Tribal chants drifted across the sands. Along the track, no more than fifty long paces from Duiker's position, a hapless squad of Malazan soldiers writhed on what were locally called Sliding Beds – four tall spears each set upright, the victim set atop the jagged points, at the shoulders and upper thighs. Depending on their weight and their strength of will in staying motionless, the impaling and the slow slide down to the ground could take hours. With Hood's blessing, the morrow's sun would hasten the tortured death. The historian felt his heart grow cold with rage.

He could not help them, Duiker knew. It was challenge enough to simply stay alive in a countryside aflame with murderous lust. But there would come a time for retribution. *If the gods will it.*

Mage fires blossomed vast and – at this distance – silent over Hissar. Was Coltaine still alive? Bult? The Seventh? Had Sormo divined what was coming in time?

He tapped his heels against his mount's flanks, continued down the coastal road. The renegade army's appearance was a shock. It had emerged as if from nowhere, and for all the chaos of the encampment there were commanders there, filled with bloodthirsty intent and capable of achieving what they planned. This was no haphazard revolt. *Kulp said a High Mage. Who else is out there? Sha'ik has had years in which to build her army of the Apocalypse, despatch her agents, plan this night – and all that will follow. We knew it was happening. Laseen should have stuck Pormqual's head on a spike long ago. A capable High Fist could have crushed this.*

'Dosii kim'aral!'

Three cloaked shapes rose from the flood track on the inland side of the road. 'A night of glory!' Duiker responded, not slowing as he rode past.

'Wait, Dosii! The Apocalypse waits to embrace you!' The figure gestured towards the encampment.

'I have kin in Hissari Harbour,' the historian replied. 'I go to share in the riches of liberation!' Duiker reined in suddenly and pulled his horse around. 'Unless the Seventh has won back the city – is this the news you have for me?'

The spokesman laughed. 'They are crushed. Destroyed in their beds, Dosii! Hissar has been freed of the Mezla curse!'

'Then I ride!' Duiker kicked the horse forward again. He held his breath as he continued on, but the tribesmen did not call after him. *The Seventh gone? Does Coltaine ride a sliding bed right now?* It was hard to believe, yet it might well be true. Clearly the attack had been sudden, backed by high sorcery – *with me dragging Kulp away, on this night of all nights, Hood curse my bones.* For all the lives within him, Sormo E'nath was still a boy, his flesh hardly steeled to such a challenge. He might well have bloodied a few noses among the enemy's mages. To expect or hope for more than that was being unfair. They would have fought hard, every one of them. Hissar's price would have been high.

Nonetheless, Duiker would have to see for himself. The Imperial Historian could do no less. More, he could ride among the enemy and that was an extraordinary opportunity. *Never mind the risks.* He would gather all the information he could, anticipating an eventual return to the ranks of a Malazan punitive force, where his knowledge could be put to lethal use. In otter words, *a spy. So much for objectivity, Duiker.* The image of the Malazan soldiers lining the trader track, dying slowly on the sliding beds, was enough to sear away his detachment.

Magic flared in the fishing village half a mile behind him. Duiker hesitated, then rode on. Kulp was a survivor, and by the look of that Coastal Guard, he had veterans at his side. The mage had faced powerful sorcery before – what he could not defeat, he could escape. Duiker's soldiering days were long past, his presence more of an impediment than an asset – they were better off without him.

But what would Kulp do now? If there were any survivors among the Seventh, then the cadre mage's place was with them. What, then, of Heboric's fate? *Well, I've done what I could for the old handless bastard. Fener guard you, old man.*

There were no refugees on the road. It seemed the fanatic call to arms was complete – all had proclaimed themselves soldiers of Dryjhna. Old women, fisherwives, children and pious grandfathers. Nonetheless, Duiker had been expecting to find Malazans, or at the very least signs of their passage, scenes where their efforts to escape came to a grisly end. Instead, the raised military road stretched bare, ghostly in the moon's silver light.

Against the glare of distant Hissar appeared desert cape-moths, wheeling and fluttering like flakes of ash as broad across as a splayed hand as they crossed back and forth in front of the historian. They were carrion-eaters, and they were heading in the same direction as Duiker, in growing numbers.

Within minutes the night was alive with the silent, spectral insects, whirling past the historian on all sides. Duiker struggled against the chill dread rising within him. *'The world's harbingers of death are many and varied.'* He frowned, trying to recall where he'd heard those words. *Probably from one of the countless dirges to Hood, sung by the priests during the Season of Rot in Unta.*

The first of the city's outlying slums appeared in the fading gloom ahead, a narrow cluster of shacks and huts clinging to the shelf above the beach. Smoke now rode the air, smelling of burning painted wood and scorched cloth. The smell of a city destroyed, the smell of anger and blind hatred. It was all too familiar to Duiker, and it made him feel old.

Two children raced across the road, ducking between shacks. One voiced a laugh that pealed with madness, too knowing by far to come from one so young. The historian rode past the spot, his skin crawling. He was astonished to feel the fear within him – *afraid of children? Old man, you don't belong here.*

The sky was lightening over the strait on his left. The cape-moths were plunging into the city ahead, vanishing inside the roiling clouds of smoke.

Duiker reined in. The coastal road split here, the main track leading straight to become a main thoroughfare of the city. A second road, on the right, skirted the city and led to the Malazan barracks compound. The historian gazed down that road, squinting. Black columns of smoke rose half a mile away above the barracks, the columns bending high up where a desert wind caught hold and pushed them seaward.

Butchered in their beds? The possibility suddenly seemed all too real. He rode towards the barracks. On his right, as shadows appeared with the rising sun, the city of Hissar burned. Support beams were giving way, mudbrick walls tumbling, cut stone shattering explosively in the blistering heat. Smoke covered the scene with its deathly, bitter shawl. Every now and then a distant scream sounded from the city's heart. It was clear that the mutiny's destructive ferocity had turned on itself. Freedom had been won, at the cost of everything.

He reached the trampled earth where the trader encampment had once been – where he and the warlock Sormo had witnessed the divination. The camp had been hastily abandoned, possibly only hours earlier. A pack of dogs from the city now rooted through the rubbish left behind.

Opposite the grounds, and on the other side of the Faladhan road, rose the fortified wall of the Malazan compound. Duiker slowed his mount to a walk, then a halt. Streaks of black scarred the few sections of bleached stone remaining upright. The sorcery that had assailed the wall had breached it in four places that he could see, each one a sundering of stone wide enough to rush a phalanx through. Bodies crowded the breaches, sprawled amidst the tumbled blocks. None wore much in the way of armour, and the weapons Duiker saw scattered about ranged from antique pikes to butcher's cleavers.

The Seventh had fought hard, meeting their attackers at every breach; in the face of savage sorcery, they had cut down their attackers by the score. No-one had been caught asleep in his bed. The historian felt a trickle of hope seep into his thoughts.

He glanced down the road, down to where the nut trees lined the cobbled street. There had been a cavalry sortie of some kind, close to the

compound's inner city gate. Two horses lay among dozens of Hissari bodies, but no lancers that he could see. Either they'd been lucky enough to lose no-one in the attack, or they'd had the time to retrieve their slain and wounded comrades. There was a hand of organization here, a strong one. *Coltaine? Bult?*

He saw no-one living down the length of the street. If battle continued, it had moved on. Duiker dismounted and approached one of the breaches in the compound wall. He clambered over the rubble, avoiding the stones slick with blood. Most of the attackers, he saw, had been killed by quarrels. Many bodies were virtually pincushioned with the stubby arrows. The range had been devastatingly short, the effect lethal. A frenzied, disorganized rush by a mob of ill-equipped Hissari stood no chance against such concentrated fire. Duiker saw no bodies beyond the ridge of tumbled stone.

The compound's training field was empty. Bulwarks had been raised here and there to establish murderous crossfire should the defence at the breaches fail – but there was no sign that that had occurred.

He stepped down from the ridge of shattered stone. The Malazan headquarters and the barracks had been torched. Duiker now wondered if the Seventh had not done it themselves. *Announcing to all that Coltaine had no intention of hiding behind walls, the Seventh and the Wickans marched out, in formation. How did they fare?*

He returned to his waiting horse. Back in the saddle he could see more smoke, billowing heavily from the Malazan Estates district. Dawn had brought a strange calm to the air. To see the city so empty of life made it all seem unreal, as if the bodies sprawled in the streets were but scarecrows left over from a harvest festival. The capemoths had found them, however, covering the forms completely, their large wings slowly fanning as they fed.

As he rode towards the Malazan Estates, he could hear the occasional shout and faint scream in the distance, barking dogs and braying mules. The roar of fires rose and fell like waves clawing a cliff face, carrying gusts of heat down the side streets hissing and rustling through the litter.

Fifty paces from the Estates Duiker found the first scene of true slaughter. The Hissari mutineers had struck the Malazan quarter with sudden ferocity, probably at the same time as the other force had hemmed in the Seventh at the compound. The merchant and noble houses had thrown their own private guards forward in frantic defence, but they were too few and, lacking cohesion, had been quickly and savagely cut down. The mob had poured into the district, battering down estate posterns, dragging out into the wide street Malazan families.

It was then, Duiker saw as his mount picked a careful path through the bodies, that madness had truly arrived. Men had been gutted, their entrails pulled out, wrapped around women – wives and mothers and aunts and sisters – who had been raped before being strangled with the intestinal ropes. The historian saw children with their skulls crushed, babies spitted on tapu skewers. However, many young daughters had been taken by the attackers as they plunged deeper into the district. If anything, their fates would be more horrific than those visited on their kin.

Duiker viewed all he saw with a growing numbness. The terrible agony that had been unleashed here seemed to remain coiled in the air, poised, ready to snatch at his sanity. In self-defence, his soul withdrew, deeper, ever deeper. His power to observe remained, however, detached completely from his feelings – the release would come later, the historian well knew: the shaking limbs, the nightmares, the slow scarification of his faith.

Expecting to see more of the same, Duiker rode towards the first square in the district. What he saw instead jarred him. The Hissari mutineers had been ambushed in the square and slaughtered by the score. Arrows had been used and then retrieved, but some shattered shafts remained. The historian dismounted to pick one up. *Wickan.* He believed he could now piece together what had occurred.

The barracks compound had been besieged. Whoever commanded the Hissari had intended to prevent Coltaine and his forces from striking out into the city, and, if the sorcery's level was any indication, had sought the complete annihilation of the Malazan army. In this the commander had clearly failed. The Wickans had sortied, broken through the encirclement,

and had ridden directly to the Estates – where they well knew the planned slaughter would have already begun. Too late to prevent the first attack at the District Gates, they had altered their route, riding around the mob, and set up an ambush in the square. The Hissari, in their thirst for more blood, had plunged forward, crossing the expanse without the foresight of scouts.

The Wickans had then killed them all. There was no risk of reprisal to prevent them later retrieving their arrow shafts. The killing must have been absolute, every escape closed off, then the precise, calculated murder of every Hissari in the square.

Duiker swung about at the sound of approaching footsteps. A band of mutineers approached from the gates behind him. They were well armed, with pikes in their hands and tulwars at their hips. Chain vests glinted from beneath the red telaban they wore. On their heads were the peaked bronze helmets of the City Guard.

'Terrible slaughter!' Duiker wailed, drawing out the Dosii accent. 'It must be avenged!'

The sergeant leading the squad eyed the historian warily. 'You have the dust of the desert upon you,' he said.

'Aye, I have ridden down from the High Mage's forces to the north. A nephew, who dwelt in the harbour district. I seek to join him—'

'If he yet lives, old man, you shall find him marching with Reloe.'

'We have driven the Mezla from the city,' another soldier said. 'Outnumbered, already sorely wounded and burdened with ten thousand refugees—'

'Silence, Geburah!' the sergeant snapped. He narrowed his gaze on Duiker. 'We go to Reloe now. Come with us. All of Hissari shall be blessed in joining in the final slaughter of the Mezla.'

Conscription. *No wonder there's no-one about. They're in the holy army whether they like it or not.* The historian nodded. 'I shall. I have vowed to protect the life of my nephew, you see...'

'The vow to scourge Seven Cities of the Mezla is greater,' the sergeant growled. 'Dryjhna demands your soul, Dosii. The Apocalypse has come – armies gather all across the land and all must harken to the call.'

'Last night I joined in spilling the blood of a Mezla Coastal Guard – my soul was given to her keeping then, Hissari.' Duiker's tone held a warning to the young sergeant. Respect *your elders, child.*

The man answered the historian with an acknowledging nod.

Leading his horse by the reins, Duiker accompanied the squad as they made their way through the Estates. Kamist Reloe's army, the sergeant explained, was marshalling on the plain to the southwest of the city. Three Odhan tribes were maintaining contact with the hated Mezla, harrying the train of refugees and the too few soldiers trying to protect them. The Mezla were seeking to reach Sialk, another coastal city twenty leagues south of Hissar. What the fools did not know, the man added with a dark grin, was that Sialk had fallen as well, and even now thousands of Mezla nobles and their families were being driven up the north road. The Mezla commander was about to see a doubling of citizens he was sworn to defend.

Kamist Reloe would then encircle the enemy, his forces outnumbering them seven to one, and complete the slaughter. The battle was expected to take place in three days' time.

Duiker made agreeable noises through all this, but his mind was racing. Kamist Reloe was a High Mage, one believed to have been killed in Raraku over ten years ago, in a clash with Sha'ik over who was destined to lead the Apocalypse. Instead of killing her rival, it was now apparent that Sha'ik had won his loyalty. The hint of murderous rivalry, feuds and personality clashes had served Sha'ik well in conveying to the Malazans an impression of internal weaknesses plaguing her cause. All *a lie. We were deceived, and now we are suffering the cost.*

'The Mezla army is as a great beast,' the sergeant said as they neared the city's edge, 'wounded by countless strikes, flanks streaming with blood. The beast staggers onward, blind with pain. In three days, Dosii, the beast shall fall.'

The historian nodded thoughtfully, recalling the seasonal boar hunts in the forests of northern Quon Tali. A tracker had told him that among the hunters who were killed in such hunts, most met their fate *after* the boar had taken a fatal wound. An unexpected, final lashing out, a murderous lunge that seemed to defy Hood's grip on the beast. Seeing victory only moments away stripped caution from the hunters. Duiker heard something of that overconfidence in the mutineer's words. The beast streamed with blood, but it was not yet dead.

The sun climbed the sky as they travelled south.

The chamber's floor sagged like a bowl, carpeted in thick, feltlike drifts of dust. Almost a third of a league into the hill's stone heart, the rough-cut walls had cracked like glass, fissures reaching down from the vaulted roof. In the centre of the room lay a fishing boat resting on one flank, its lone mast's unreached sail hanging like rotted webbing. The dry, hot air had driven the dowels from the joins and the planks had contracted, splaying beneath the boat's own weight.

'This is no surprise,' Mappo said from the portal way.

Icarium's lips quirked slightly, then he stepped past the Trell and approached the craft. 'Five years? Not longer – I can still smell the brine. Do you recognize the design?'

'I curse myself for having taken no interest in such things,' Mappo sighed. 'Truly I should have anticipated moments like these – what was I thinking?'

'I believe,' Icarium said slowly, resting a hand on the boat's prow, 'this is what Iskaral Pust wished us to find.'

'I thought the quest was for a broom,' the Trell muttered.

'No doubt his broom will turn up of its own accord. It was not the goal of the search we were to value, but the journey.'

Mappo's eyes narrowed suspiciously on his friend, then his canines showed in an appreciative grin. 'That is always the way, isn't it?' He

followed the Jhag into the chamber. His nostrils flared. 'I smell no brine.'

'Perhaps I exaggerated.'

'I'll grant you it does not look like it's been here for centuries. What are we to make of this, Icarium? A fishing boat, found in a room deep within a cliff in a desert thirty leagues from anything bigger than a spring. The High Priest sets before us a mystery.'

'Indeed.'

'Do *you* recognize the style?'

'Alas, I am as ignorant of water craft and other things of the sea as you, Mappo. I fear we have already failed in Iskaral Pust's expectations.'

The Trell grunted, watching Icarium begin examining the boat.

'There are nets in here, deftly made. A few withered things that might have been fish once ... ah!' The Jhag reached down. Wood clattered. He straightened, faced Mappo, in his hands the High Priest's broom.

'Do we now sweep the chamber?'

'I think our task is to return this to its rightful owner.'

'The boat or the broom?'

Icarium's brows rose. 'Now that is an interesting question, friend.'

Mappo frowned, then shrugged. If there had been anything clever in his query, it was there purely by chance. He was frustrated. Too long underground, too long inactive and at the whim of a madman's schemes. It was an effort to bend his mind to this mystery, and indeed he resented the assumption that it was worth doing at all. After a long moment, he sighed. 'Shadow swept down on this craft and its occupant, plucked them both away and delivered them here. Was this Pust's own boat? He hardly strikes me as from fisher bloodlines. I've not heard a single dockside curse pass his lips, no salty metaphors, no barbed catechisms.'

'So, not Iskaral Pust's craft.'

'No. Leaving...'

'Well, either the mule or Servant.'

Mappo nodded. He rubbed his bristled jaw. 'I'll grant you a mule in a boat dragging nets through shoals might be interesting enough to garner a god's curiosity, sufficient to collect the two for posterity.'

'Ah, but what would be the value without a lake or pond to complete the picture? No, I think we must eliminate the mule. This craft belongs to Servant. Recall his adept climbing skills—'

'Recall the horrid soup—'

'That was laundry, Mappo.'

'Precisely my point, Icarium. You are correct. Servant once plied waters in this boat.'

'Then we are agreed.'

'Aye. Hardly a move up in the world for the poor man.'

Icarium shook himself. He raised the broom like a standard. 'More questions for Iskaral Pust. Shall we begin the return journey, Mappo?'

Three hours later the two weary men found the High Priest of Shadow seated at the table in the library. Iskaral Pust was hunched over a Deck of Dragons. 'You're late,' he snapped, not looking up. 'The Deck keens with fierce energy. The world outside is in flux – your love of ignorance is not worthy of these precipitous times. Attend this field, travellers, or remain lost at your peril.'

Snorting his disgust, Mappo strode to where the jugs of wine waited on a shelf. It seemed even Icarium had been brought short by the High Priest's words, as he dropped the broom clattering on the floor and pulled back a chair opposite Iskaral Pust. The frustrated air about the Jhag did not make likely an afternoon of calm conversation. Mappo poured two cups of wine, then returned to the table.

The High Priest raised the Deck in both hands, closed his eyes and breathed a silent prayer to Shadowthrone. He began a spiral field, laying the centre card first.

'Obelisk!' Iskaral squealed, shifting nervously on his chair. 'I knew it! Past present future, the here, the now, the then, the when—'

'Hood's breath!' Mappo breathed.

The second card landed, its upper left corner overlapping Obelisk's lower right. 'The Rope – Shadow Patron of Assassins, hah!' Subsequent cards followed in swift succession, Iskaral Pust announcing their identities as if his audience were ignorant or blind. 'Oponn, the male Twin upright, the luck that pushes, ill luck, terrible misfortune, miscalculation, poor circumstance ... Sceptre ... Throne ... Queen of High House Life ... Spinner of High House Death ... Soldier of High House Light . .. Knight of Life, Mason of Dark ...' A dozen more cards followed, then the High Priest sat back, his eyes thinned to slits, his mouth hanging open. 'Renewal, a resurrection without the passage through Hood's Gates. Renewal...' He looked up, met Icarium's eyes. 'You must begin a journey. Soon.'

'Another quest?' the Jhag asked so quietly that Mappo's hackles rose in alarm.

'Aye! Can you not see, fool?'

'See what?' Icarium whispered.

Clearly ignorant that his life hung by a thread, Iskaral Pust rose, wildly gesturing at the field of cards. 'It's right here in front of you, idiot! As clear as my Lord of Shadow could make it! How have you survived this long?' In his frenzy, the High Priest snatched at the wispy patches of hair that remained on his head, yanking the tufts this way and that. He was fairly hopping in place. 'Obelisk! Can't you see? Mason, Spinner, Sceptre, Queens and Knights, Kings and fools!'

Icarium moved lightning fast, across the table, both hands closing around the High Priest's neck, snatching him into the air and dragging him across the tabletop. Iskaral Pust gurgled, his eyes bulging as he kicked feebly.

'My friend,' Mappo warned, fearing he would have to step in and pry Icarium's hands from his victim's neck before lasting damage was done.

The Jhag threw the man back down, shaken by his own anger. He drew a deep breath. 'Speak plainly, priest,' he said calmly.

Iskaral Pust writhed for a moment longer on the tabletop, scattering the wooden cards to the floor, then he stilled. He looked up at Icarium with wide, tear-filled eyes. 'You must venture forth,' he said in a ravaged voice. 'Into the Holy Desert.'

'Why?'

'Why? Why? Sha'ik is dead.'

'We have to assume,' Mappo said slowly, 'that the characteristic of never answering directly is bred into the man. As natural as breathing.'

They sat in the vestibule the Trell had been given as his quarters. Iskaral Pust had vanished only a few minutes after voicing his pronouncement, and of Servant there had been no sign since their return from the cavern housing the fishing boat.

Icarium was nodding. 'He spoke of a resurrection. It must be considered, for this sudden death of Sha'ik seems to defy every prophecy, unless indeed the "renewal" marks a return from Hood's Gates.'

'And Iskaral Pust expects us to attend this rebirth? How effortlessly has he ensnared us in his mad web. For myself, I am glad the witch is dead, and I hope she remains that way. Rebellion is ever bloody. If her death plucks this land back from the brink of mutiny, then to interfere would put us in great peril.'

'You fear the wrath of the gods?'

'I fear being unwittingly used by them, or their servants, Icarium. Blood and chaos is the wine and meat of the gods – most of them, anyway. Especially the ones most eager to meddle in mortal affairs. I will do nothing to achieve their desires.'

'Nor I, friend,' the Jhag said, rising from his chair with a sigh. 'Nonetheless, I would witness such a resurrection. What deceit has the power to wrest a soul from Hood's clasp? Every ritual of resurrection I have ever heard attempted inevitably resulted in a price beyond reckoning. Even as he relinquishes a soul, Hood ensures he wins in the exchange.'

Mappo closed his eyes, kneaded his broad, scarred brow. My *friend, what are we doing here? I see your desperation, seeking every path in the hopes of revelation. Could I speak openly to you, I would warn you from the truth.* 'This is an ancient land,' he said softly. 'We cannot guess what powers have been invested in the stone, sand and earth. Generation upon generation.' He glanced up, suddenly weary. 'When we wandered the edge of Raraku, Icarium, I always felt as if I was walking the narrowest strand, in a web stretching to every horizon. The ancient world but sleeps, and I feel its restless shifting – more now than ever before.' Do *not awaken this place, friend, lest it awaken you.*

'Well,' Icarium said after a long, thoughtful moment, 'I shall venture out in any case. Will you accompany me, Mappo Trell?'

His eyes on the heaved pavestones of the floor, Mappo slowly nodded.

The wall of sand rose seamlessly into the sky's ochre dome. Somewhere in that fierce, swirling frenzy was the Holy Desert Raraku. Fiddler, Crokus and Apsalar sat on their lathered mounts at the top of a trail that led down the slope of the hills, out onto the desert wastes. A thousand paces into Raraku and the world simply disappeared.

A faint, sibilant roar reached them.

'Not,' Crokus said quietly, 'your average storm, I assume.'

His spirits had been low since awakening in the morning to find that Moby had once again disappeared. The creature was discovering its wild instincts, and Fiddler suspected they wouldn't see it again.

'When I heard mention of the Whirlwind,' the Daru thief continued after a moment, 'I assumed it was ... well ... figurative. A state of being, I suppose.

So tell me, do we now look upon the *true* Whirlwind? The wrath of a goddess?'

'How can a rebellion be born in the heart of that?' Apsalar wondered. 'It would be a challenge to even open one's eyes in that storm, much less orchestrate a continent-wide uprising. Unless, of course, it's a barrier, and beyond there is calm.'

'Seems likely,' Crokus agreed.

Fiddler grunted. 'Then we've no choice. We ride through.'

Their Gral hunters were less than ten minutes behind them, driving equally exhausted horses. They numbered at least a score, and even considering Apsalar's god-given skills, and the assortment of Moranth munitions in Fiddler's pack, the option of making a stand against the warriors was not a promising prospect.

The sapper glanced at his companions. Sun and wind had burned their faces, leaving white creases at the corners of the eyes. Chapped, peeling and split lips showed as straight lines, bracketed by deeper lines. Hungry, thirsty, weaving in their saddles with exhaustion – he was in as bad a shape, he well knew. Worse, given he had not the reserves of youth to draw upon. *Mind you, Raraku marked me once before. Long ago. I know what's out there.*

The other two seemed instinctively to understand Fiddler's hesitation, waiting with something like respect, even as the sound of thundering horse hooves rolled up the trail at their backs.

Apsalar finally spoke. 'I wish to know more ... of this desert. Its power...'

'You shall,' Fiddler growled. 'Wrap up your faces. We go to greet the Whirlwind.'

Like a wing sweeping them into its embrace, the storm closed around them. A savage awareness seemed to ride the spinning sand, reaching relentlessly past the folds of their telaban, a thousand abrasive fingers clawing paths

across their skin. Loose cloth and rope ends spiked upward, whipping with urgent rhythm. The roar filled the air, filled their skulls.

Raraku had awakened. All that Fiddler had sensed the last time he rode these wastes, sensed as an underlying restlessness, the spectral promise of nightmares beneath the surface, was now unleashed, exultant with freedom.

Heads ducked, the horses plodded onward, buffeted by wayward gusts of sand-filled air. The ground underneath was hard-packed clay and rubble – the once deep cloak of fine white sand had been lifted from the surface, now sang in the air, and with it were stripped away the patient, all-covering centuries.

The group dismounted, hooded their mounts' heads, then led them on.

Bones appeared underfoot. Rusting lumps of armour, chariot wheels, remnants of horse and camel tack, pieces of leather, the humped foundation stones of walls – what had been a featureless desert now showed its bones, and they crowded the floor in such profusion as to leave Fiddler in awe. He could not take a step without something crunching underfoot.

A high stone-lined bank suddenly blocked their way. It was sloped, rising to well above their heads. Fiddler paused for a long moment, then he gathered his mount's reins and led the climb. Scrambling, stumbling against the steep bank, they eventually reached the top and found themselves on a road.

The paving stones were exquisitely cut, evenly set, with the thinnest of cracks visible between them. Bemused, Fiddler crouched down, trying to hold his focus as he studied the road's surface – a task made more difficult by the streams of airborne sand racing over the stones. There was no telling its age. While he imagined that, even buried beneath the sands, there would be signs of wear, he could detect none. Moreover, the engineering showed skill beyond any masonry he'd yet seen in Seven Cities.

To his right and left the road ran spearshaft-straight as far as his squinting eyes could see. It stood like a vast breakwater that even this sorcerous storm could not breach.

Crokus leaned close. 'I thought there were no roads in Raraku!' he shouted over the storm's keening wail.

The sapper shook his head, at a loss to explain.

'Do we follow it?' Crokus asked. 'The wind's not as bad up here—'

As far as Fiddler could judge, the road angled southwest-ward, deep into the heart of Raraku. To the northeast it would reach the Pan'potsun Hills within ten leagues – in that direction they would come to the hills perhaps five leagues south of where they had left them. There seemed little value in that. He stared again down the road to his right. *The heart of Raraku. It is said an oasis lies there. Where Sha'ik and her renegades are encamped. How far to that oasis? Can water be found anywhere in between here and there?* Surely a road crossing a desert would be constructed to intersect sources of water. It was madness to think otherwise, and clearly the builders of this road were too skilled to be fools. *Tremorlor . . . If the gods will it, Ms track will lead us to that legendary gate. Raraku has a heart, Quick Ben said. Tremorlor, a House of the Azath.*

Fiddler mounted the Gral gelding. 'We follow the road,' he yelled to his companions, gesturing southwestward.

They voiced no complaints, turning to their mounts. They had bowed to his command, Fiddler realized, because both were lost in this land. They relied on him completely. Hood's *breath, they think I know what I'm doing. Should I now tell them that the plan to find Tremorlor rests entirely on the faith that the fabled place actually exists? And that Quick Ben's suppositions are accurate, despite his unwillingness to explain the source of his certainty? Do I tell them we're more likely to die out here than anything else – if not from wasting thirst, then at the hands of Sha'ik's fanatical followers?*

'Fid!' Crokus cried, pointing up the road. He spun around to see a handful of Gral warriors ascending the bank, less than fifty paces away. Their hunters had split up into smaller parties, as dismissive of the sorcerous storm as Fiddler's group had been. A moment later they saw their quarry and voiced faint war cries as they pulled their horses onto the flat top.

'Do we run?' Apsalar asked.

The Gral had remounted and were now unslinging their lances.

'Looks like they're not interested in conversation,' the sapper muttered. In a louder voice he said, 'Leave them to me! You two ride on!'

'What, again?' Crokus slid back down from his horse. 'What would be the point?'

Apsalar followed suit. She stepped close to Fiddler, her eyes meeting his. 'With you dead, what are our chances of surviving this desert?'

About as bad as with me leading you. He fought the temptation to give voice to his thought, simply shrugging in reply as he unlimbered his crossbow. 'I mean to make this a short engagement,' he said, loading a cusser quarrel into the weapon's slot.

The Gral had pulled their mounts into position on the road. Lances lowered, they kicked the horses into motion.

Despite himself, Fiddler's heart broke for those Gral horses, even as he aimed and fired. The quarrel struck the road three paces in front of the charging tribesmen. The detonation was deafening, the blast a bruised gout of flame that drove back the airborne sand and the wind carrying it, and flung the attackers and their mounts like a god's hand, backward onto the road and off the sides. Blood shot upward to pull sand down like hail. In a moment the wind swept the flames and smoke away, leaving nothing but twitching bodies.

A *pointless pursuit, and now pointless deaths.* I *am not Gral. Would the crime of impersonation trigger such a relentless hunt?* I *wish I could have asked you, warriors.*

'For all that they have twice saved us,' Crokus said, 'those Moranth munitions are horrible, Fiddler.'

Silent, the sapper loaded another quarrel, slipped a leather thong over the bone trigger to lock it, then slung the heavy weapon over a shoulder. Climbing back into the saddle, he gathered the reins in one hand and

regarded his comrades. 'Stay sharp,' he said. 'We may ride into another party without warning. If we do, try to break through them.'

He lightly kicked the mare forward.

The wind came as laughter to his ears, the sound seemingly stained with pleasure at witnessing senseless violence. It was eager for more. *The Whirlwind awakened – this goddess is mad, riven with insanity – who is there that can stop her?* Fiddler's slitted eyes stared down the road, the featureless march of stones leading, ever leading, into an ochre, swirling maw. Into nothingness.

Fiddler growled an oath, pushing away the futility clawing at his thoughts. They would have to find Tremorlor, before the Whirlwind swallowed them whole.

The aptorian was a darker shade thirty paces on Kalam's left, striding with relentless ease through the sand-filled wind. The assassin found himself thankful for the storm – his every clear sighting of his unwanted companion scraped his nerves raw. He'd encountered demons before, on battlefields and in war-ravaged streets. Often they had been thrown into the fray by Malazan mages, and so were allies of a sort, even as they went about exacting the wills of their masters with apparent indifference to all else. On thankfully rarer occasions, he'd come face to face with a demon unleashed by an enemy. At such times survival was his only concern, and survival meant flight. Demons were flesh and blood, to be sure – he'd seen enough of one's insides once, after it had been blown apart by one of Hedge's cusser quarrels, to retain the unwelcome intimacy of the memory – but only fools would try to face down a demon's cold rage and singularity of purpose.

Only two kinds of people die in battle, Fiddler had once said, *fools and the unlucky.* Trading blows with a demon was both unlucky and foolish.

For all that, the aptorian grated strangely on Kalam's eyes, like an iron blade trying to cut granite. Even to focus too long on the beast was to invite a wave of nausea.

There was nothing welcome in Sha'ik's gift. Gift . . . *or spy. She's unleashed the Whirlwind and now the goddess rides her, as certain as possession. That's likely to trim short the wick of gratitude. Besides, even Dryjhna would not so readily waste an aptorian demon on something so mundane as escort. So, friend* Apt, *I cannot trust you.*

Over the past few days he'd tried losing the beast, departing camp silently an hour before dawn, plunging into the thickest twists of spinning wind. Outracing the creature was a hopeless task – it could outpace any earthly animal in both speed and endurance, and for all his efforts Apt held on to him like a well-heeled hound – although mercifully at a distance.

The wind scoured the rock-scabbed hills with a voracious fury, carving into cracks and fissures as if hungering to spring loose every last speck of sand. The smooth, humped domes of bleached limestone lining the ridges on either side of the shallow valley he rode along seemed to age before his eyes, revealing countless wrinkles and scars.

He'd left the Pan'potsun Hills behind six days earlier, crossing the seamless border into another sawbacked ridge of hills called the Anibaj. The territory this far south of Raraku was less familiar to him. He'd come close on occasion, following the well-travelled trader tracks skirting the eastern edge of the range. The Anibaj were home to no tribes, although hidden monasteries were rumoured to exist.

The Whirlwind had rolled out of Raraku the night before, a star-blotting tidal wave of sorcery that left Kalam shaken despite his anticipating its imminent arrival. Dryjhna had awakened with a hunger fierce enough to render the assassin appalled. He feared he would come to regret his role, and every sighting of Apt only deepened that fear.

The Anibaj were lifeless to Kalam's eyes. He'd seen no sign of habitation, disguised or otherwise. The occasional stronghold ruin hinted at a more crowded past, but that was all. If ascetic monks and nuns hid in these wastelands, the blessing of their deities kept them from mortal eyes.

And yet, as he rode hunched on his saddle, the wind pummelling his back, Kalam could not shake the sense that something was trailing him. The

awareness had risen within him over the past six hours. A presence was out there – human or beast – beyond the range of his sight, following, somehow clinging to his trail. He knew his and his horse's scent only preceded them, driven south on the wind, and no doubt swiftly tattered apart before it had gone ten paces. Nor did any tracks his horse left last much beyond a few seconds. Unless the hunter's vision was superior to the assassin's – which he did not think likely – so that he was able to stay just beyond Kalam's own range, the only explanation he was left with was ... *Hood-spawned sorcery. The last thing I need.*

He glared to the left again and could make out Apt's vast shape, its strangely mechanical flow as it kept pace with him. The demon showed no alarm – *mind you, how could one tell?* – but rather than drawing comfort from it he felt instead a growing unease, a suspicion that the demon's role no longer included protecting him.

Abruptly the wind fell, the roar shifting to the hiss of settling sand. Grunting in surprise, Kalam reined in and looked back over his shoulder. The storm's edge was a tumbling, stationary wall five paces behind him. Sand rained from it forming scalloped dunes along a slightly curving edge that ran to the horizon's edge both east and west. Overhead the sky had lightened to a faintly burnished copper. The sun, hanging an hour above the western horizon, was the colour of beaten gold.

The assassin walked his horse on another dozen paces, then halted a second time. Apt had not emerged from the storm. A shiver of alarm took hold and he reached for the crossbow hanging from its strap on the saddlehorn.

A jolt of sudden panic took his horse and the beast shied sideways, head lifted and ears flattened. A strong, spicy smell filled the air. Kalam rolled from the saddle even as something passed swiftly through the air over him. Relinquishing his grip on the unloaded crossbow, the assassin unsheathed both long-knives even as his right shoulder struck the soft sand, his momentum taking him over and onto his feet in a low crouch. His attacker – a desert wolf of startling mass – had failed in clearing the sidestepping

horse and was now scrambling for purchase athwart the saddle, its amber eyes fixed on Kalam.

The assassin lunged forward, thrusting with the narrow blade in his right hand. Another wolf struck him from the left, a writhing weight of thick muscle and snapping jaws, taking him to the ground. His left arm was pinned by the beast's weight. Long canines gouged into the mail links covering his shoulder. Rings popped and snapped, the teeth breaking through and pushing hard against his flesh.

Kalam reached around and drove the point of his right long-knife high into the animal's flank, the blade slipping under the spine just fore of the wolf's hip. The tightening jaws released his shoulder; jerking back, the animal kicked to pull away from him. As the assassin struggled to pull the blade free, he felt the edge bite bone. The Aren steel bent, then snapped.

Howling in pain, the wolf leapt away, back hunched, spinning as if chasing its tail in an effort to close its jaws on the jutting fragment of blade.

Spitting sand, Kalam rolled to his feet. The first wolf had been thrown from its purchase across the saddle by the horse's frenzied bucking. It had then taken a solid kick to the side of the head. The beast stood dazed half a dozen paces away, blood running from its nose.

There were others, somewhere behind the storm wall, their growls, yips and snarls muted by the wind. They battled something, it was obvious. Kalam recalled Sha'ik's mention of a D'ivers that had attacked the aptorian – *inconclusively* – some weeks earlier. It seemed the shapeshifter was trying again.

The assassin saw his horse bolt away down the trail, southward, bucking as it went. He spun back to the two wolves, only to find them gone, twin spattered paths of blood leading back to the storm. From within the Whirlwind all sounds of battle had ceased.

A moment later, Apt lumbered into view. Dark blood streamed from its flanks and dripped from its needle fangs, making the grin of its jawline all the more ghastly. It swung its elongated head and regarded Kalam with its black, knowing eye.

Kalam scowled. 'I risk enough without this damned feud of yours, Apt.'

The demon clacked its jaws, a snakelike tongue darting out to lick the blood from its teeth. He saw it was trembling – some of the puncture wounds near its neck looked deep.

Sighing, the assassin said, 'Treating you will have to await finding my horse.' He reached for the small canteen at his belt. 'But at the very least I can clean your wounds.' He stepped forward.

The demon flinched back, head ducking menacingly.

Kalam stopped. 'Perhaps not, then.' He frowned. There was something odd about the demon, standing on a low hump of bleached bedrock, its head turned as its slitted nostrils flared to test the air. The assassin's frown deepened. *Something. . .* After a long moment, he sighed, glancing down at the grip of the broken long-knife in his right hand. He'd carried the matched pair for most of his adult life, like a mirror to the twin loyalties within him. Which *of the two have I now lost?*

He brushed dust from his telaba, collected his crossbow, slinging it over a shoulder, then began the walk southward, down the trail towards the distant basin. Alongside him, and closer now, Apt followed, head sunk low, its single forelimb kicking up puffs of dust that glowed pink in the sun's failing light.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Death shall be my bridge.

Toblakai saying

Burning wagons, the bodies of horses, oxen, mules, men,. women and children, pieces of furniture, clothing and other household items lay scattered on the plain south of Hissar, for as far as Duiker could see. Here and there mounds of bodies rose like earthless barrows, where warriors had made a last, desperate stand. There'd been no mercy to the killing, no prisoners taken.

The sergeant stood a few paces in front of the historian, as silent as his men as he took in the scene that was the Vin'til Basin and the battle that would become known for the village less than a league distant, Bat'rol.

Duiker leaned in his saddle and spat. 'The wounded beast had fangs,' he said sourly. Oh, *well done, Coltaine! They'll hesitate long before closing with you again.* The bodies were Hissari – even children had been flung into the fighting. Black, scorched scars crossed the battlefield as if a god's claws had swept down to join the slaughter. Pieces of burned meat clogged the scars – human or beast, there was no means of telling. Capemoths fluttered like silent madness over the scene. The air stank of sorcery, the clash of warrens had spread greasy ash over everything. The historian felt beyond horror, his heart hardened enough to feel only relief.

Somewhere to the southwest was the Seventh, remnants of loyal Hissari auxiliaries, and the Wickans. *And* tens *of thousands of Malazan refugees, bereft of their belongings . . . but alive.* The peril remained. Already, the army of the Apocalypse had begun regrouping – shattered survivors contracting singly and in small groups towards the Meila Oasis where awaited the Sialk reinforcements and latecoming desert tribes. When they

renewed the pursuit, they would still vastly outnumber Coltaine's battered army.

One of the sergeant's men returned from his scouting to the west. 'Kamist Reloe lives,' he announced. 'Another High Mage brings a new army from the north. There will be no mistakes next time.'

The words were less reassuring to the others than they would have been a day ago. The sergeant's mouth was a thin slash as he nodded. 'We join the others at Meila, then.'

'Not I,' Duiker growled.

Eyes narrowed on him.

'Not yet,' the historian added, scanning the battlefield. 'My heart tells me I shall find the body of my nephew ... out there.'

'Seek first among the survivors,' one soldier said.

'No. My heart does not feel fear, only certainty. Go on. I shall join you before dusk.' He swung a hard, challenging gaze to the sergeant. 'Go.'

The man gestured mutely.

Duiker watched them stride westward, knowing that should he see them again, it would be from the ranks of the Malazan army. And somehow they would be less than human then. *The game the mind must play to unleash destruction.* He'd stood amidst the ranks more than once, sensing the soldiers alongside him seeking and finding that place in the mind, cold and silent, the place where husbands, fathers, wives and mothers became killers. And practice made it easier, each time. *Until it becomes a place you never leave.*

The historian rode out into the battlefield, almost desperate to rejoin the army. It was not a time to be alone, in the heart of slaughter, where every piece of wreckage or burnt and torn flesh seemed to cry out silent outrage. Sites of battle held on to a madness, as if the blood that had soaked into the soil remembered pain and terror and held locked within it the echoes of screams and death cries.

There were no looters, naught but flies, capemoths, rhizan and wasps – Hood's myriad sprites, wings fanning and buzzing in the air around him as he rode onward. Half a mile ahead a pair of riders galloped across the south ridge, heading west, their telaban whipping twisted and wild behind them.

They had passed out of his sight by the time Duiker reached the low ridge. Before him the dusty ground was rutted and churned. The column that had departed the battlesite had done so in an orderly fashion, though its width suggested that the train was huge. *Nine, ten wagons abreast. Cattle. Spare mounts . . . Queen of Dreams! How can Coltaine hope to defend all this? Two score thousand refugees, perhaps more, all demanding a wall of soldiers protecting their precious selves – even Dassem Ultor would have balked at this.*

Far to the east the sky was smeared ruddy brown. Like Hissar, Sialk was aflame. But there had only been a small Marine garrison in that city, a stronghouse and compound down at the harbour, with its own jetty and three patrol craft. With Oponn's luck they'd made good their withdrawal, though in truth Duiker held little hope in that. More likely they would have sought to protect the Malazan citizens – *adding their bodies to the slaughter.*

It was simple enough to follow the trail Coltaine's army and the refugees had made, southwestward, inland, into the Sialk Odhan. The nearest city in which they might find succour, Caron Tepasi, was sixty leagues distant, with the hostile clans of the Tithan occupying the steppes in between. *And Kamist Reloe's Apocalypse in pursuit.* Duiker knew he might rejoin the army only to die with them.

Nevertheless, the rebellion might well have been crushed elsewhere. There was a Fist in Caron Tepasi, another in Guran. If either or both had succeeded in extinguishing the uprising in their cities, then a feasible destination was available to Coltaine. Such a journey across the Odhan, however, would take months. While there was plenty of grazing land for the livestock, there were few sources of water, and the dry season had just begun. *No, even* to *contemplate such a journey is beyond desperation.* It *is madness.*

That left ... counterattack. A swift, deadly thrust, retaking Hissar. Or Sialk. A destroyed city offered more opportunity for defence than did steppe land. Moreover, the Malazan fleet could then relieve them – *Pormqual might be a fool, but Admiral Nok is anything but.* The 7th Army could not be simply abandoned, for without it any hope of quickly ending the rebellion was lost.

For the moment, however, it was clear that Coltaine was leading his column to Dryj Spring, and despite the headstart, Duiker expected to rejoin him well before then. The foremost need for the Malazans now was water. Kamist Reloe would know this as well. He had Coltaine trapped into predictability, a position no commander desired. The fewer choices the Fist possessed, the more dire was the situation.

He rode on. The sun slowly angled westward as he continued following the detritus-strewn trail, its mindless regard making Duiker feel insignificant, his hopes and fears meaningless. The occasional body of a refugee or soldier who had died of wounds lay on the trackside, dumped without ceremony. The sun had swelled their corpses, turning the skin deep red and mottled black. Leaving such unburied bodies in their wake would have been a difficult thing to do. Duiker sensed something of the desperation in that beleaguered force.

An hour before dusk a dust cloud appeared a half-league inland. Tithan horsewarriors, the historian guessed, riding hard towards Dryj Spring. There would be no peace for Coltaine and his people. Lightning raids on horseback would harry the encampment's pickets; sudden drives to peel away livestock, flaming arrows sent into the refugee wagons ... a night of unceasing terror.

He watched the Tithansi slowly pull ahead, and contemplated forcing his weary mount into a canter. The tribal riders no doubt led spare mounts, however, and the historian would have to kill his horse in the effort to reach Coltaine before them. And then he could do naught but warn of the inevitable. *Besides, Coltaine must know what's coming. He knows, because he once rode as a renegade chieftain, once harried a retreating Imperial army across the Wickan plains.*

He continued on at a steady trot, thinking about the challenge of the night ahead: the ride through enemy lines, the unheralded approach to the Seventh's nerve-frayed pickets. The more he thought on it, the less likely seemed his chances of surviving to see the dawn.

The red sky darkened with that desert suddenness, suffusing the air with the colour of drying blood. Moments before he lost the last of the light, Duiker chanced to glance behind him. He saw a grainy cloud, visibly expanding as it swept southward. It seemed to glitter with a hundred thousand pale reflections, as if a wind was flipping the underside of birch leaves at the edge of a vast forest. Capemoths, surely in their millions, leaving Hissar behind, flying to the scent of blood.

He told himself that it was a mindless hunger that drove them. He told himself that the blots, stains and smudges in that billowing, sky-filling cloud were only by chance finding the shape of a face. Hood, after all, had no need to manifest his presence. Nor was he known as a melodramatic god – the Lord of Death was reputed to be, if anything, ironically modest. Duiker's imaginings were the product of fear, the all too human need to conjure symbolic meaning from meaningless events. *Nothing more.*

Duiker kicked his horse into a canter, eyes fixed once more on the growing darkness ahead.

From the crest of the low rise, Felisin watched the seething floor of the basin. It was as if insanity's grip had swept out, from the cities, from the minds of men and women, to stain the natural world. With the approach of dusk, as she and her two companions prepared to break camp for the night's walk, the basin's sand had begun to shiver like the patter of rain on a lake. Beetles began emerging, each black and as large as Baudin's thumb, crawling in a glittering tide that soon filled the entire sweep of desert before them. In their thousands, then hundreds of thousands, yet moving as one, with a singular purpose. Heboric, ever the scholar, had gone off to determine their destination. She had watched him skirt the far edge of the insect army, then vanish beyond the next ridge.

Twenty minutes had passed since then.

Crouching beside her was Baudin, his forearms resting on the large backpack, squinting to pierce the deepening gloom. She sensed his growing unease but had decided that she would not be the one to give voice to their shared concern. There were times when she wondered at Heboric's grasp of what mattered over what didn't. She wondered if the old man was, in fact, a liability.

The swelling had ebbed, enough so that she could see and hear, but a deeper pain remained, as if the bloodily larvae had left something behind under her flesh, a rot that did more than disfigure her appearance, but laid a stain on her soul as well. There was a poison lodged within her. Her sleep was filled with visions of blood, unceasing, a crimson river that carried her like flotsam from sunrise to sunset. Six days since their escape from Skullcup, and a part of her looked forward to the next sleep.

Baudin grunted.

Heboric reappeared, jogging steadily along the basin's edge towards their position. Squat, hunched, he was like an ogre shambling out from a child's bedtime story. Blunt knobs where his hands should be, about to be raised to reveal fang-studded mouths. *Tales to frighten children. I could write those. I need no imagination, only what I see all around me. Heboric, my boar-tattooed ogre. Baudin, red-scarred where one ear used to be, the hair growing tangled and bestial from the puckered skin. A pair to strike terror, these two.*

The old man reached them, kneeling to sling his arms through his backpack. 'Extraordinary,' he mumbled.

Baudin grunted again. 'But can we get around them? I ain't wading through, Heboric'

'Oh, aye, easily enough. They're just migrating to the next basin.'

Felisin snorted. 'And you find that extraordinary?'

'I do,' he said, waiting as Baudin tightened the pack's straps. 'Tomorrow night they'll march to the next patch of deep sand. Understand? Like us

they're heading west, and like us they'll reach the sea.'

'And then?' Baudin asked. 'Swim?'

'I have no idea. More likely they'll turn around and march east, to the other coast.'

Baudin strapped on his own pack and stood. 'Like a bug crawling the rim of a goblet,' he said.

Felisin gave him a quick glance, remembering her last evening with Beneth. The man had been sitting at his table in Bula's, watching flies circle the rim of his mug. It was one of the few memories that she could conjure up. *Beneth, my lover, the Fly King circling Skullcup. Baudin left him to rot, that's why he won't meet my eye. Thugs never lie well. He'll pay for that, one day.*

'Follow me,' Heboric said, setting off, his feet sinking into the sand so that it seemed he walked on stumps to match those at the end of his arms. He always started out fresh, displaying an energy that struck Felisin as deliberate, as if he sought to refute that he was old, that he was the weakest among them. The last third of the night he would be seven or eight hundred paces behind them, head ducked, legs dragging, weaving with the weight of the pack that nearly dwarfed him.

Baudin seemed to have a map in his head. Their source of information had been precise and accurate. Even though the desert seemed lifeless, a barrier of wasting deadliness, water could be found. Spring-fed pools in rock outcroppings, sinks of mud surrounded by the tracks of animals they never saw, where one could dig down an arm-span, sometimes less, and find the life-giving water.

They had carried enough food for twelve days, two more than was necessary for the journey to the coast. It was not a large margin but it would have to suffice. For all that, however, they were weakening. Each night, they managed less distance in the hours between the sun's setting and its rise. Months at Skullcup, working the airless reaches, had diminished some essential reserve within them.

That knowledge was plain, though unspoken. Time now stalked them, Hood's most patient servant, and with each night they fell back farther, closer to that place where the will to live surrendered to a profound peace. *There's a sweet promise to giving up, hut realizing that demands a journey. One of spirit. You can't walk to Hood's Gate, you find it before you when the fog clears.*

'Your thoughts, lass?' Heboric asked. They had crossed two ridge lines, arriving on a withered pan. The stars were spikes of iron overhead, the moon yet to rise.

'We live in a cloud,' she replied. 'All our lives.'

Baudin grunted. 'That's durhang talking.'

'Never knew you were so droll,' Heboric said to the man.

Baudin fell silent. Felisin grinned to herself. The thug would say little for the rest of the night. He did not take well being mocked. I *must remember that, for when he next needs cutting down.*

'My apologies, Baudin,' Heboric said after a moment. 'I was irritated by what Felisin said and took it out on you. More, I appreciated the joke, no matter that it was unintended.'

'Give it up,' Felisin sighed. 'A mule comes out of a sulk eventually, but it's nothing you can force.'

'So,' Heboric said, 'while the swelling's left your tongue, its poison remains.'

She flinched. *If you only knew the full truth of that.*

Rhizan flitted over the cracked surface of the pan, their only company now that they'd left the mindless beetles behind. They had seen no-one since crossing Sinker Lake the night of the Dosii mutiny. Rather than loud alarms and frenetic pursuit, their escape had effected nothing. For Felisin, it made the drama of that night now seem somehow pathetic. For all their self-importance, they were but grains of sand in a storm vaster than anything they could comprehend. The thought pleased her.

Nevertheless, there was cause for worry. If the uprising had spread to the mainland, they might arrive at the coast only to die waiting for a boat that would never come.

They reached a low serrated ridge of rock outcroppings, silver in the starlight and looking like the vertebrae of an immense serpent. Beyond it stretched a wavelike expanse of sand. Something rose from the dunes fifty or so paces ahead, angled like a toppled tree or marble column, though, as they came nearer, they could see that it was blunted, crooked.

A vague wind rustled on the sands, twisting as if in the wake of a spider-bitten dancer. Gusts of sand caressed their shins as they strode on. The bent pillar, or whatever it was, was proving farther away than Felisin had first thought. As a new sense of scale formed in her mind, her breath hissed between her teeth.

'Aye,' Heboric whispered in reply.

Not fifty paces away. More like five hundred. The wind-blurred surface had deceived them. The basin was not a flat sweep of land, but a vast, gradual descent, rising again around the object – a wave of dizziness followed the realization.

The scythe of the moon had risen above the southern horizon by the time they reached the monolith. By unspoken agreement, Baudin and Heboric dropped their packs, the thug sitting down and leaning against his, already dismissive of the silent edifice towering over them.

Heboric removed the lantern and the firebox from his pack. He blew on the hoarded coals, then set alight a taper, which he used to light the lantern's thick wick. Felisin made no effort to help, watching with fascination as he managed the task with a deftness belying the apparent awkwardness of the scarred stumps of his wrists.

Slinging one forearm under the lantern's handle, he rose and approached the dark monolith.

Fifty men, hands linked, could not encircle the base. The bend occurred seven or eight man-lengths up, at about three-fifths of the total length. The

stone looked both creased and polished, dark grey under the colourless light of the moon.

The glow of the lantern revealed the stone to be green, as Heboric arrived to stand before it. She watched his head tilt back as he scanned upward. Then he stepped forward and pressed a stump against the surface. A moment later he stepped back.

Water sloshed beside her as Baudin drank from a waterskin. She reached out and, after a moment, he passed it to her. Sand whispered as Heboric returned. The ex-priest squatted.

Felisin offered him the bladder. He shook his head, his toadlike face twisted into a troubled frown.

'Is this the biggest pillar you've seen, Heboric?' Felisin asked. 'There's a column in Aren ... or so I've heard ... that's as high as twenty men, and carved in a spiral from top to bottom. Beneth described it to me once.'

'Seen it,' Baudin grumbled. 'Not as wide, but maybe higher. What's this one made of, Priest?'

'Jade.'

Baudin grunted phlegmatically, but Felisin saw his eyes widen slightly. 'Well, I've seen taller. I've seen wider—'

'Shut up, Baudin,' Heboric snapped, wrapping his arms around himself. He glared up at the man from under the ridge of his brows. 'That's not a column over there,' he rasped. 'It's a finger.'

Dawn stole into the sky, spreading shadows on the landscape. The details of that carved jade finger were slowly prised from the gloom. Swells and folds of skin, the whorls of the pad, all became visible. So too did a ridge in the sand directly beneath it – another finger.

Fingers, *to hand. Hand to arm, arm to body* . . . For all the logic of that progression, it was impossible, Felisin thought. No such thing could be

fashioned, no such thing could stand or stay in one piece. A hand, but no arm, no body.

Heboric said nothing, wrapped around himself, motionless as the night's darkness faded. He held the wrist that had touched the edifice tucked under him, as if the memory of that contact brought pain. Staring at him in the growing light, Felisin was struck anew by his tattoos. They seemed to have deepened somehow, become sharper.

Baudin finally rose and began pitching the two small tents, close to the base of the finger, where the shadows would hold longest. He ignored the towering monolith as if it was nothing more than the bole of a tree, and set about driving deep into the sand the long, thin spikes through the first tent's brass-hooped corners.

An orange tint suffused the air as the sun climbed higher. Although Felisin had seen that colour of sky before on the island, it had never before been so saturated. She could almost taste it, bitter as iron.

As Baudin began on the second tent, Heboric finally roused himself, his head lifting as he sniffed the air, then squinted upward. 'Hood's breath!' he growled. 'Hasn't there been enough?'

'What is it?' Felisin demanded. 'What's wrong?'

'There's been a storm,' the ex-priest said. 'That's Otataral dust.'

At the tents, Baudin paused. He ran a hand across one shoulder, then frowned at his palm. 'It's settling,' he said.

'We'd best get under cover—'

Felisin snorted. 'As if that will do any good! We've mined the stuff, in case you've forgotten. Whatever effect it's had on us, it's happened long ago.'

'Back at Skullcup we could wash ourselves at day's end,' Heboric said, slinging an arm through the food pack's strap and dragging it towards the tents.

She saw that he still held his other stump – the one that had touched the edifice – tight against his midriff.

'And you think that made a difference?' she asked. 'If that's true, why did every mage who worked there die or go mad? You're not thinking clearly, Heboric—'

'Sit there, then,' the old man snapped, ducking under the first tent's flap and pulling the pack in after him.

Felisin glanced at Baudin. The thug shrugged, resumed readying the second tent, without evident haste.

She sighed. She was exhausted, yet not sleepy. If she took to the tent, she would in all likelihood simply lie there, eyes open and studying the weave of the canvas above her face.

'Best get inside,' Baudin said.

'I'm not sleepy.'

He stepped close, the motion fluid like a cat's. 'I don't give a damn if you're sleepy or not. Sitting out under the sun will dry you out, meaning you'll drink more water, meaning less for us, meaning get in this damned tent, lass, before I lay a hand to your backside.'

'If Beneth was here you wouldn't—'

'The bastard's dead!' he snarled. 'And Hood take his rotten soul to the deepest pit!'

She sneered. 'Brave *now* – you wouldn't have dared stand up against him.'

He studied her as he would a bloodfly caught in a web. 'Maybe I did,' he said, a sly grin showing a moment before he turned away.

Suddenly cold, Felisin watched the thug stride over to the other tent, crouch down and crawl inside. I'm *not fooled, Baudin. You were a mongrel skulking in alleys, and all that's changed is that you've left the alleys behind. You'd* squirm in *the sand at Beneth's feet, if he were here.* She waited another minute in defiance before entering her own tent.

Unfurling her bedroll, she lay down. Her eagerness to sleep was preventing her from doing so. She stared up at the dark imperfections in the canvas weave, wishing she had some durhang or a jug of wine. The crimson river of her dreams had become an embrace, protective and welcoming. She conjured from memory an echo of the image, and all the feelings that went with it. The river flowed with purpose, ordered and in-exorable; when in its warm currents, she felt close to understanding that purpose. She knew she would discover it soon, and with that knowledge her world would change, become so much more than it was now. Not just a girl, plump and out of shape and used up, the vision of her future reduced to days when it should be measured in decades – a girl who could call herself young only with sneering irony. For all that the dream promised her, there was a value in self-contempt, a counterpoint between her waking and sleeping hours, what was and what could be. A tension between what was real and what was imagined, or so Heboric would put it from his acid-pocked critical eye. The scholar of human nature held it in low opinion. He would deride her notions of destiny, and her belief that the dream offered something palpable would give him cause to voice his contempt. *Not that he's needed cause. I hate myself, but he hates everyone else. Which of us has lost the most?*

She awoke groggy, her mouth parched and tasting of rust. The air was grainy, a dim grey light seeping through the canvas. She heard sounds of packing outside, a short murmur from Heboric, Baudin's answering grunt. Felisin closed her eyes, trying to recapture the steady, flowing river that had carried her through her sleep, but it was gone.

She sat up, wincing as every joint protested. The others experienced the same, she knew. A nutritional deficiency, Heboric guessed, though he did not know what it might be. They had dried fruit, strips of smoked mule and some kind of Dosii bread, brick-hard and dark.

Muscles aching, she crawled from the tent into the chill morning air. The two men sat eating, the packets of rations laid out before them. There was little left, with the exception of the bread, which was salty and tended to make them desperately thirsty. Heboric had tried to insist that they eat the

bread first – over the first few days – while they were still strong, not yet dehydrated, but neither she nor Baudin had listened, and for some reason he abandoned the idea with the next meal. Felisin had mocked him for that, she recalled. *Unwilling to follow your own advice, eh, old man?* Yet the advice had been good. They would reach the salt-laden, deathly coast with naught but even saltier bread to eat, and little water to assuage their thirst.

Maybe we didn't listen because none of us believed we would ever reach the coast. Maybe Heboric decided the same after that first meal. Only I wasn't *thinking that far ahead, was I? No wise acceptance of the futility of all this.* I *mocked and ignored the advice out of spite, nothing more.* As for Baudin, well, rare was the criminal with brains, and he wasn't at all rare.

She joined the breakfast, ignoring their looks as she took an extra mouthful of lukewarm water from the bladder when washing down the smoked meat.

When she was done, Baudin repacked the food.

Heboric sighed. 'What a threesome we are!' he said.

'You mean our dislike of each other?' Felisin asked, raising a brow. 'You shouldn't be surprised, old man,' she continued. 'In case you haven't noticed, we're all broken in some way. Aren't we? The gods know you've pointed out my fall from grace often enough. And Baudin's nothing more than a murderer – he's dispensed with all notions of brotherhood, and is a bully besides, meaning he's a coward at heart...' She glanced over to see him crouched at the packs, flatly eyeing her. Felisin gave him a sweet smile. 'Right, Baudin?'

The man said nothing, the hint of a frown in his expression as he studied her.

Felisin returned her attention to Heboric. 'Your flaws are obvious enough – hardly worth mentioning—'

'Save your breath, lass,' the ex-priest muttered. 'I don't need no fifteen-year-old girl telling me my failings.'

'Why *did* you leave the priesthood, Heboric? Skimmed the coffers, I suppose. So they cut your hands off, then tossed you onto the rubbish heap behind the temple. That's certainly enough to make anyone take up writing history as a profession.'

'Time to go,' Baudin said.

'But he hasn't answered my question—'

'I'd say he has, girl. Now shut up. Today you carry the other pack, not the old man.'

'A reasonable suggestion, but no thanks.'

Face darkening, Baudin rose.

'Leave it be,' Heboric said, moving to sling the straps through his arms. In the gloom Felisin saw the stump that had touched the jade finger for the first time. It was swollen and red, the puckered skin stretched. Tattoos crowded the end of the wrist, turning it nearly solid dark. She realized then that the etchings had deepened everywhere on him, grown riotous like vines.

'What's happened to you?'

He glanced over. 'I wish I knew.'

'You burned your wrist on that statue.'

'Not burned,' the old man said. 'Hurts like Hood's own kiss, though. Can magic thrive buried in Otataral sand? Can Otataral give birth to magic? I've no answers, lass, for any of this.'

'Well,' she muttered, 'it was a stupid thing to do – touching the damned thing. Serves you right.'

Baudin started off without comment. Ignoring Heboric, Felisin fell in behind the thug. 'Is there a waterhole ahead this night?' she asked.

The big man grunted. 'Should've asked that before you took more than your ration.'

'Well, I didn't. So, is there?'

'We lost half a night yesterday.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning no water until tomorrow night.' He looked back at her as he walked. 'You'll wish you'd saved that mouthful.'

She made no reply. She had no intention of being honourable when the time came for her next drink. *Honour's for fools. Honour's a fatal flaw. I'm not going to die on a point of honour, Baudin. Heboric's probably dying anyway. It'd be wasted on him.*

The ex-priest trudged in her wake, the sound of his footfalls dimming as he fell farther back as the hours passed. In the end, she concluded, it would be she and Baudin, just the two of them, standing facing the sea at the western edge of this Queen-forsaken island. The weak always fall to the wayside. It was the first law of Skullcup; indeed, it was the first lesson she'd learned – in the streets of Unta on the march to the slaveships.

Back then, in her naivety, she'd looked upon Baudin's murder of Lady Gaesen as an act of reprehensible horror. If he were to do the same today – *putting Heboric out of his misery* – she would not even blink. A *long journey, this one. Where will it end?* She thought of the river of blood, and the thought warmed her.

True to Baudin's prediction, there was no waterhole to mark the end of the night's journey. The man selected as a campsite a sandy bed surrounded by wind-sculpted projections of limestone. Bleached human bones littered the bed, but Baudin simply tossed them aside when laying out the tents.

Felisin sat down with her back to rock and watched for Heboric's eventual appearance at the far end of the flat plain they had just crossed. He had never lagged behind this distance before – the plain was over a third of a league across – and as the dawn's blush lightened the skyline before her, she began to wonder if his lifeless body wasn't lying out there somewhere.

Baudin crouched beside her. 'I told you to carry the food pack,' he said, squinting eastward.

Not *out of sympathy for the old man, then.* 'You'll just have to go find it, won't you?'

Baudin straightened. Flies buzzed around him in the still-cool air as he stared eastward for a long moment.

She watched him set off, softly gasping as he loped into a steady jog once clear of the rocks. For the first time she became truly frightened of Baudin. *He's been hoarding food –he has a hidden skin of water – there's no other way he could still have such reserves.* She scrambled to her feet and rushed over to the other pack.

The tents had been raised, the bedrolls set out within them. The pack sat in a deflated heap close by. Left in it was a wrapped pouch that she recognized as containing their first-aid supplies, a battered flint and tinder box that she'd not seen before – *Baudin's own* – and, beneath a flap sewn along one edge at the bottom of the pack, a small, flat packet of deer hide.

No skin of water, no hidden pockets of food. Unaccountably, her fear of the man deepened.

Felisin sat down in the soft sand beside the pack. After a moment she reached to the hide packet, loosened its drawstrings and unfolded it to reveal a set of fine thief's tools – an assortment of picks, minute saws and files, knobs of wax, a small sack of finely ground flour, and two dismantled stilettos, the needlelike blades deeply blued and exuding a bitter, caustic smell, the bone hafts polished and dark-stained, the small hilts in pieces that hinged together to form an X-shaped guard, and holed and weighted pommels of iron wrapped around lead cores. *Throwing weapons. An assassin's weapons.* The last item in the packet was tucked into a leather loop: the talon of some large cat, amber-coloured and smooth. She wondered if it held poison, painted invisibly on its surface. The item was ominous in its mystery.

Felisin rewrapped the packet, returning it and everything else to the pack. She heard heavy footsteps approach from the east and straightened.

Baudin appeared from between the limestone projections, the pack on his shoulders and Heboric in his arms.

The thug was not even out of breath.

'He needs water,' Baudin said as he strode into the camp and laid the unconscious man down on the soft sand. 'In this pack, lass, quickly—'

Felisin did not move. 'Why? We need it more, Baudin.'

The man paused for a heartbeat, then slipped his arms free of the pack and dragged it around. 'Would you want him saying the same, if you were the one lying here? Soon as we get off this island, we can go our separate ways. But for now, we need each other, girl.'

'He's dying. Admit it.'

'We're all dying.' He unstoppered the bladder and eased it between Heboric's cracked lips. 'Drink, old man. Swallow it down.'

'Those are your rations you're giving him,' Felisin said. 'Not mine.'

'Well,' he said with a cold grin, 'no-one would think you anything but noble-born. Mind you, opening your legs for anyone and everyone back in Skullcup was proof enough, I suppose.'

'It kept us all alive, you bastard.'

'Kept you plump and lazy, you mean. Most of what me and Heboric ate came from the favours I did for the Dosii guards. Beneth gave us dregs to keep you sweet. He knew we wouldn't tell you about it. He used to laugh at your noble cause.'

'You're lying.'

'As you say,' he said, still grinning.

Heboric coughed, his eyes opening. He blinked in the dawn's light.

'You should see yourself,' Baudin said to him. 'From five feet away you're one solid tattoo – as dark as a Dal Honese warlock. Up this close and I can

see every line – every hair of the Boar's fur. It's covered your stump, too, not the one that's swollen but the other one. Here, drink some more—'

'Bastard!' Felisin snapped. She watched as the last of their water trickled into the old man's mouth. He *left Beneth to die. Now he's trying to poison the memory of him, too.* It *won't work. I did what I did to keep them both alive, and they hate that fact – both of them. It eats them inside, the guilt for the price* I *paid. And that's what Baudin's now trying to deny. He's cutting his conscience loose, so when he slips one of those knives into me he won't feel a thing. Just another dead noble-born. Another Lady Gaesen.*

She spoke loudly, meeting Heboric's eyes. 'I dream a river of blood every night. I ride it. And you're both there, at first, but only at first, because you both drown in that river. Believe anything you like. I'm the one who's going to live through this. Me. Just me.'

She left the two men to stare at her back as she walked to her tent.

The next night, they found the spring an hour before the moon rose. It revealed itself at the base of a stone depression, fed from below by some unseen fissure. The surface appeared to be grey mud. Baudin went down to its edge, but made no move to scoop out a hole and drink the water that would seep into it. After a moment, her head spinning with weakness, Felisin dropped the food pack from her shoulders and stumbled down to kneel beside him.

The grey was faintly phosphorescent and consisted of drowned capemoths, their wings spread out and overlapping to cover the entire surface. Felisin reached to push the floating carpet aside but Baudin's hand snapped out, closing on her wrist.

'It's fouled,' he said. 'Full of capemoth larvae, feeding off the bodies of their parents.'

Hood's *breath, not more larvae.* 'Strain the water through a cloth,' Felisin said.

He shook his head. 'The larvae piss poison, fill the water with it. Eliminates any competition. It'll be a month before the water's drinkable.'

'We need it, Baudin.'

'It'll kill you.'

She stared down at the grey sludge, her desire desperate, an agonized fire in her throat, in her mind. This *can't be. We'll die without this.*

Baudin turned away. Heboric had arrived, weaving as he staggered down the bedrock slope. His skin was black as the night, yet shimmering silver as the etched highlights of the boar hair reflected the stars overhead. Whatever infection had seized the stump of his right wrist had begun to fade, leaving a suppurating, crackled network of split skin. It exuded a strange smell of powdered stone.

He was an apparition, and in answer to his nightmarish appearance Felisin laughed, on the edge of hysteria. 'Remember the Round, Heboric? In Unta? Hood's acolyte, the priest covered in flies ... who was naught but flies. He had a message for you. And now, what do I see? Staggering into view, a man aswarm – not in flies but in tattoos. Different gods, but the same message, that's what I see. Let Fener speak through those peeling lips, old man. Will your god's words echo Hood's? Is the world truly a collection of balances, the infinite tottering to and fro of fates and destinies? Boar of Summer, Tusked Sower of War, what do you say?'

The old man stared at her. His mouth opened, but no words came forth.

'What was that?' Felisin cupped an ear. 'The buzzing of wings? Surely not!'

'Fool,' Baudin muttered. 'Let's find a place to camp. Not here.'

'Ill omens, murderer? I never knew they meant anything to you.'

'Save your breath, girl,' Baudin said, facing the stone slope.

'Makes no difference,' she replied. 'Not now. We're still dancing in the corner of a god's eye, but it's only for show. We're dead, for all our twitching about. What's Hood's symbol in Seven Cities? They call him the

Hooded One here, don't they? Out with it, Baudin, what's carved on the Lord of Death's temple in Aren?'

'I'd guess you already know,' Baudin said.

'Capemoths, the harbingers, the eaters of rotting flesh. It's the nectar of decay for them, the rose bloating under the sun. Hood delivered us a promise in the Round at Unta, and it's just been fulfilled.'

Baudin climbed to the rim of the depression, her words following him up. Orange-tinged by the rising sun, he turned and looked down on her. 'So much for your river of blood,' he said in a low, amused voice.

Dizziness washed through her. Her legs buckled and she abruptly sat down, jarring her tailbone on the hard bedrock. She glanced over to see Heboric lying huddled an arm-span away. The soles of his moccasins had worn through, revealing ravaged, glistening flesh. Was he already dead? As *good as*. 'Do something, Baudin.'

He said nothing.

'How far to the coast?' she asked.

'Doubt it would matter,' he replied after a moment. 'The boat was to have patrolled for three or so nights, no longer. We're at least four days from the coast and getting weaker by the hour.'

'And the next water?'

'About seven hours' walk. More like fourteen, the shape we're in.'

'You seemed spry enough last night!' she snapped. 'Running off to collect Heboric. You don't seem as parched as us, either—'

'I drink my own piss.'

'You what?'

He grunted. 'You heard me.'

'Not a good enough answer,' she decided after thinking a moment. 'And don't tell me you're eating your own shit, too. It still wouldn't explain

things. Have you made a pact with some god, Baudin?'

'You think doing something like that's a simple task? Hey, Queen of Dreams, save me and I'll serve you. Tell me, how many of *your* prayers have been answered? Besides, I ain't got faith in anything but me.'

'So you haven't given up yet?'

She thought he wouldn't answer, but after a long minute in which she'd begun to sink into herself, he startled her awake with a blunt 'No.'

He removed his pack, then skidded back down the slope. Something in the able economy of his movements filled her with sudden dread. *Calls me plump, eyes me like a piece of flesh – not to use like* Beneth *did, but more as if he's eyeing his next meal.* Heart hammering, she watched for the first move, a hungry flash in his small, bestial eyes.

Instead he crouched down beside Heboric, pulling the unconscious man onto his back. He leaned close to listen for breath, then sat back, sighing.

'He's dead?' Felisin asked. 'You do the skinning – I won't eat tattooed skin no matter how hungry I am.'

Baudin glanced at her momentarily, but said nothing, returning to his examination of the ex-priest.

'Tell me what you're doing,' she finally said.

'He lives, and that alone may save us.' He paused. 'How far you fall, girl, matters nothing to me. Just keep your thoughts to yourself.'

She watched him peel Heboric's rotting clothing away, revealing the astonishing weave of tattooing beneath. Baudin then moved to keep his own shadow behind him before bending close to study the dark patterning on the ex-priest's chest. He was looking for something.

'A raised nape,' she said dully, 'the ends pulled down and almost touching, almost a circle. It surrounds a pair of tusks.'

He stared, eyes narrowing.

'Fener's own mark, the one that's sacred,' she said. 'It's what you're looking for, isn't it? He's excommunicated, yet Fener remains within him. That much is obvious by those living tattoos.'

'And the mark?' he asked coolly. 'How did you come to know such things?'

'A lie I spun for Beneth,' she explained as the man resumed his examination of the ex-priest's crowded flesh. 'I needed Heboric to support it. I needed details of the cult. He told me. You mean to call on the god.'

'Found it,' he said.

'Now what? How do you reach another man's god, Baudin? There's no keyhole in that mark, no sacred lock you can pick.'

He jerked at that, his eyes glittering as they bore into her own.

She didn't blink, revealed nothing.

'How do you think he lost his hands?' Felisin asked innocently.

'He was a thief, once.'

'He was. But it was the excommunication that took them. There *was* a key, you see. The High Priest's warren to his god. Tattooed on the palm of his right hand. Held to the sacred mark – hand to chest, basically – as simple as a salute. I spent days healing from Beneth's beating, and Heboric talked. Told me so many things – I should have forgotten all of it, you know. Drinking durhang tea by the gallon, but that brew just dissolved the surface, that filter that says what's important, what isn't. His words poured in unobstructed, and stayed. You can't do it, Baudin.'

He raised Heboric's right forearm, studied the glistening, flushed stump in the growing light.

'You can never go back,' she said. 'The priesthood made sure of that. He isn't what he was, and that's that.'

With a silent snarl Baudin pulled the forearm around to push the stump against the sacred mark.

The air screamed. The sound battered them, flung them both down to scrabble, claw, mindlessly dig into the rock – *away . . . away from the pain. Away!* There was such agony in that shriek, it descended like fire, darkening the sky overhead, spreading hairline fissures through the bedrock, the cracks spreading outward from under Heboric's motionless body.

Blood streaming from her ears, Felisin tried to crawl away, up the trembling slope. The fissures – Heboric's tattoos had blossomed out from his body, leapt the unfathomable distance from skin to stone – swept under her, turning the rock into something slick and greasy under her palms.

Everything had begun to shake. Even the sky seemed to twist, yanked down into itself as if a score of invisible hands had reached through unseen portals, grasping the fabric of the world with cold, destructive rage.

The scream was unending. Rage and unbearable pain meshed together like twin strands in an ever-tightening rope. Closing in a noose around her neck, the sound blocked the outside world – its air, its light.

Something struck the ground, the bedrock under her shuddering, throwing her upward. She came back down hard on one elbow. The bones of her arm shivered like the blade of a sword. The glare of the sun dimmed as Felisin fought for air. Her wide eyes caught a glimpse of something beyond the basin, lifting ponderously from the plain in a heaving cloud of dust. Two-toed, a fur-snarled hoof, too large for her to fully grasp, rising up, pulled skyward into a midnight gloom.

The tattoo had leapt from stone to the air itself, a woadstained web growing in crazed, jerking blots, snapping outward in all directions.

She could not breathe. Her lungs burned. She was dying, sucked airless into the void that was a god's scream.

Sudden silence, out beyond the ringing echoes in her skull. Air flooded her, cold and bitter, yet sweeter than anything she had known. Coughing, spitting bile, Felisin pushed herself onto her hands and knees, shakily raised her head.

The hoof was gone. The tattoo hung like an after-image across the entire sky, slowly fading as she watched. Movement pulled her gaze down, to Baudin. He'd been on his knees, hands cupping the sides of his head. He now slowly straightened, tears of blood filling the lines of his face.

The ground under her feeling strangely fluid, Felisin tottered to her feet. She looked down, blinking dumbly at the mosaic of limestone. The swirling furred patterns of the tattoo still trembled, rippling outward from her moccasins as she struggled for balance. *The cracks, the tattoos . . . they go down, and down, all the way down. As if I'm standing atop a bed of* league-deep nails, *each nail kept upright only by the others surrounding it. Have you come from the Abyss, Fener? It's said your sacred warren borders Chaos itself. Fener? Are you among us now?* She turned to meet Baudin's eyes. They were dull with shock, though she could detect the first glimmers of fear burning through.

'We wanted the god's attention,' she said. 'Not the god himself.' A trembling seized her. She wrapped her arms around herself, forcing more words forth. 'And he *didn't want to* come!'

His flinch was momentary, then he rolled his shoulders in something that might have been a shrug. 'He's gone now, ain't he?'

'Are you sure of that?'

He shook off the need to answer, looking instead at Heboric. After a moment's study, he said, 'He breathes steadier now. Nor so wrinkled and parched. Something's happened to him.'

She sneered. 'The reward for missing getting stomped on by a hair's breadth.'

Baudin grunted, his attention suddenly elsewhere.

She followed his gaze. The pool of water was gone, drained away until only a carpet of capemoth corpses remained. Felisin barked a laugh. 'Some salvation we've had here.'

Heboric slowly curled himself into a ball. 'He's here,' he whispered.

'We know,' Baudin said.

'In the mortal realm...' the ex-priest continued after a moment. 'Vulnerable.'

'You're looking at it the wrong way,' Felisin said. 'The god you no longer worship took your hands. So now you pulled him down. Don't mess with mortals.'

Either her cold tone or brutal words in some way steeled through Heboric. He uncurled, raised his head, then sat up. His gaze found Felisin. 'Out of the mouth of babes,' he said with a grin that knew nothing of humour.

'So he's here,' Baudin said, looking around. 'How can a god hide?'

Heboric rose to his feet. 'I'd give what's left of an arm to study a field of the Deck right now. Imagine the maelstrom among the Ascendants. This is not a fly-specked visitation, not a pluck and strum on the strands of power.' He lifted his arms, frowning down at the stumps. 'It's been years, but the ghosts are back.'

Watching Baudin's confusion was a struggle in itself. 'Ghosts?'

'The hands that aren't there,' Heboric explained. 'Echoes. Enough to drive a man mad.' He shook himself, squinted sunward. 'I feel better.'

'You look it,' Baudin said.

The heat was building. In an hour it would soar.

Felisin scowled. 'Healed by the god he rejected. It doesn't matter. If we stay in our tents today we'll be too weak to do anything come dusk. We have to walk now. To the next water-hole. If we don't we're dead.' *But I'll outlive you, Baudin. Enough to drive the dagger home.*

Baudin shouldered his pack. Grinning, Heboric slung his arms through the straps of the pack she'd been carrying. He rose easily, though taking a step to catch his balance once he straightened.

Baudin led the way. Felisin fell in behind him. A *god stalks the mortal realm,*)yet *is afraid. He has power unimaginable, yet he hides.* And

somehow Heboric had found the strength to withstand all that had happened. And *the fact that he's responsible. This should have broken him, shattered his soul. Instead, he bends.* Could his wall of cynicism withstand such a siege for long? What *did* he do to lose his hands?

She had her own inner turmoil to manage. Her thoughts plundered every chamber in her mind. She still envisaged murder, yet felt a vaguely mocking wave of comradeship for her two companions. She wanted to run from them, sensing that their presence was a vortex tugging her into madness and death, yet she knew that she was also dependent on them.

Heboric spoke behind her. 'We'll make it to the coast. I smell water. Close. To the coast, and when we get there, Felisin, you will find that nothing has changed. Nothing at all. Do you grasp my meaning?'

She sensed a thousand meanings to his words, yet understood none of them.

Up ahead, Baudin gave a shout of surprise.

Mappo Trell's thoughts travelled westward almost eight hundred leagues, to a dusk not unlike this one but two centuries past. He saw himself crossing a plain of chest-high grass, but the grass had been plastered down, laden with what looked like grease, and as he walked the very earth beneath his hide boots shifted and shied. He'd known centuries already, wedded to war in what had become an ever-repeating cycle of raids, feuding and bloody sacrifices before the god of honour. Youth's game, and he'd long grown weary of it. Yet he'd stayed, nailed to a single tree but only because he'd grown used to the scenery around it. It was amazing what could be endured when in the grip of inertia. He had reached a point where anything strange, unfamiliar, was cause for fear. But unlike his brothers and sisters, Mappo could not ride that fear across the full span of his life. For all that, it had taken the horror he now approached to prise him from the tree.

He had been young when he walked out of the trader town that was his home. He was caught – like so many of his age back then – in a fevered backlash, rejecting the rotting immobility of the Trell towns and the elder

warriors who'd become merchants trading in bhederin, goats and sheep, and now relived their fighting paths in the countless taverns and bars. He embraced the wandering ways of old, willingly suffered initiation into one of the back-land clans that had retained the traditional lifestyle.

The chains of his convictions held for hundreds of years, snapped at last in a way he could never have foreseen.

His memories remained sharp, and in his mind he once again strode across the plain. The ruins of the trader town where he'd been born were now visible. A month had passed since its destruction. The bodies of the fifteen thousand slain – those that had not burned in the raging fires – had long since been picked clean by the plain's scavengers. He was returning home to bleached bone, fragments of cloth and heat-shattered brick.

The ancient shoulder-women of his adopted clan had divined the tale from the flat bones they burned, as the Nameless Ones had predicted months earlier. While the Trell of the towns had become strangers to them all, they were kin. The task that remained was not, however, one of vengeance. This pronouncement silenced the many companions who, like Mappo, had been born in the destroyed town. No, all notions of vengeance must be purged in the one chosen for the task ahead. Thus were the words of the Nameless Ones, who foresaw this moment.

Mappo still did not understand why he had been chosen. He was no different from his fellow warriors, he believed. Vengeance was sustenance. More than meat and water, the very reason to eat and drink. The ritual that would purge him would destroy all that he was. *You will be an unpainted hide, Mappo. The future will offer its own script, writing and shaping your history anew. What was done* to *the town of our kin must never happen again. You will ensure that. Do you understand?*

Expressions of dreadful necessity. Yet, without the horrific destruction of the town of his birth Mappo would have defied them all. He'd walked the overgrown main street, with its riotous carpet of weeds and roots, and had seen the glimmer of sun-bleached bones at his feet.

Near the market round, he discovered a Nameless One awaiting him, standing in the clearing's centre, grey-faded robes flickering in the prairie wind, hood drawn back to reveal a stern woman's visage. Pale eyes met his as he approached. The staff she held in one hand seemed to writhe in her grip.

'We do not see in years,' she hissed.

'But in centuries,' Mappo replied.

'It is well. Now, warrior, you must learn to do the same. Your elders shall decree it so.'

The Trell slowly gazed around, squinting at the ruins. 'It has more the feel of a raider's army – it's said that such forces exist south of Nemil—'

Her sneer surprised him with its unveiled contempt. 'One day he shall return to his home, as you've done here and now. Until that time, you must attend—'

'Why me, damn you!'

Her answer was a faint shrug.

'And if I defy you?'

'Even that, warrior, will demand patience.' She raised the staff then, the gesture drawing his eye. The twisting, buckling wood seemed to reach hungrily for the Trell, growing, filling his world until he was lost in its tortured maze.

'Strange how a land untravelled can look so familiar.'

Mappo blinked, the memories scattered by the sound of that familiar soft voice. He glanced up at Icarium. 'Stranger still how the mind's eye can travel so far and so fast, yet return in an instant.'

The Jhag smiled. 'With that eye you might explore the entire world.'

'With that eye you might escape it.'

Icarium's gaze narrowed as he scanned the rubble-strewn sweep of desert below. They'd climbed a tel the better to see the way ahead. 'Your memories always, fascinate me, since I seem to have so few of my own, and more so since you have always been so reluctant to share them.'

'I was recalling my clan,' Mappo said, shrugging. 'It is astonishing the trivial things one comes to miss. Birthing season for the herds, the way we winnowed the weak in unspoken agreement with the plains' wolves.' He smiled. 'The glory I earned when I'd snuck into a raiding party's camp and broken the tips of every warrior's knife, then sneaked back out with no-one awakening.' He sighed. 'I carried those points in a bag for years, tied to my war belt.'

'What happened to them?'

'Stolen back by a cleverer raider.' Mappo's smile broadened. 'Imagine *her* glory!'

'Was that all she stole?'

'Ah, leave me some secrets, friend.' The Trell rose, brushing sand and dust from his leather leggings. 'If anything,' he said after a pause, 'that sandstorm has grown a third in size since we stopped.'

Hands on his hips, Icarium studied the dark wall bisecting the plain. 'I believe it has marched closer, as well,' he said. 'Born of sorcery, perhaps the very breath of a goddess, its strength still grows. *I* can feel it reaching out to us.'

'Aye.' Mappo nodded, repressing a shiver. 'Surprising, assuming that Sha'ik is indeed dead.'

'Her death may have been necessary,' Icarium said. 'After all, can mortal flesh command this power? Can a living being stay alive being the gateway between Dryjhna and this realm?'

'You're thinking she's become Ascendant? And in doing so left her flesh and bones behind?'

'It's possible.'

Mappo fell silent. The possibilities multiplied each time they discussed Sha'ik, the Whirlwind and the prophecies. Together, he and Icarium were sowing their own confusion. *And whom* might *that serve?* Iskaral Pust's grinning face appeared in his mind. Breath hissed through his teeth. 'We're being manipulated,' he growled. 'I can feel it. Smell it.'

'I've noted your raised hackles,' Icarium said with a grim smile. 'For myself, I've become numb to such notions – I have felt manipulated all my life.'

The Trell shook himself to disguise his flinch. 'And,' he asked softly, 'who would be doing that?'

The Jhag shrugged, glanced down with a raised eyebrow. 'I stopped asking that question long ago, friend. Shall we eat? The lesson needed here is that mutton stew is a taste superior to that of sweet curiosity.'

Mappo studied Icarium's back as the warrior strode down into camp. *But what of sweet vengeance, friend?*

They rode down the ancient road, harried by banshee gusts of sand-filled wind. Even the Gral gelding was stumbling with exhaustion, but Fiddler had run out of options. He had no answer to what was happening.

Somewhere in the impenetrable sweeps of sand to their right a running battle was under way. It was close – it *sounded* close, but of the combatants they could see no sign, nor was Fiddler of a mind to ride to investigate. In his fear and exhaustion, he'd arrived at a fevered, panicky conviction that staying on the road was all that kept them alive. If they left it they would be torn apart.

The battle sounds were not clashing steel, nor the death cries of men. The sounds were of beasts – roars, snaps, snarls, keening songs of terror and pain and savage fury. Nothing human. There might have been wolves in the unseen struggle, but other, wholly different throats voiced their own frantic participation. The nasal groans of bears, the hiss of large cats, and other

sounds – reptilian, avian, simian. *And demons. Mustn't forget those demonic barks – Hood's own nightmares couldn't be worse.*

He rode without reins. Both hands gripped the sand-pitted stock of his crossbow. It was cocked, a flamer quarrel nocked in place, and had been since the scrap began, *ten hours ago.* The gut-wound cord was weary by now, he well knew. The wider than usual spread of the steel ribs told him as much. The quarrel would not fly far, and its flight would be soft. But he needed neither accuracy nor range for the flamer to be effective. The knowledge that to drop the weapon would result in their being engulfed – he and his horse both – in raging fire, kept reminding him of that efficacy each time his aching, sweat-slick hands let the weapon slip slightly in his grip.

He could not go on much longer. A single glance back over his shoulder showed Apsalar and Crokus still with him, their horses past the point of recovery and now running until life fled their bodies. Not long now.

The Gral gelding screamed and slewed sideways. Fiddler was suddenly awash in hot liquid. Blinking and cursing, he shook the fluid from his eyes. *Blood. A* Fener-born *Hood-damned gushing fountain of blood.* It had shot out from the impenetrable air-borne sand. *Something got close. Something else stopped it from getting any closer. Queen's blessing, what in the Abyss is going on?*

Crokus shouted. Fiddler looked back in time to see him leap clear of his collapsing mount. The animal's front legs folded under it. He watched the horse's chin strike hard on the cobbles, leaving a smear of blood and froth. It jerked its head clear in one last effort to recover, then rolled, legs kicking in the air a moment before sagging and falling still.

The sapper pried a hand loose from the crossbow, gathered the reins and drew his gelding to a halt. He swung the stumbling beast around. 'Dump the tents!' he shouted to Crokus, who had regained his feet. 'That's the freshest of the spare mounts. Quickly, damn you!'

Slumped in her saddle, Apsalar rode close. 'It's no use,' she said through cracked lips. 'We have to stop.'

Snarling, Fiddler glared out into the biting sheets of sand. The battle was getting closer. Whatever was holding them back was giving ground. He saw a massive shape loom into view, then vanish again as quickly. It seemed to have leopards riding its shoulders. Off to one side four hulking shapes appeared, low to the ground and rolling forward black and silent.

Fiddler swung the crossbow around and fired. The bolt struck the ground a half-dozen paces from the four beasts. Sheets of flame washed over them. The creatures shrieked.

He spared no time to watch, pulling at random another quarrel from the hardened case strapped to the saddle. He'd only a dozen quarrel-mounted Moranth munitions to start with. He was now down to nine, and of those only one more cusser. He spared a glance as he loaded the quarrel – another flamer – then resumed scanning the wall of heaving sand, leaving his hands to work by memory.

Shapes were showing, flashing like grainy ghosts. A dozen dog-sized winged reptiles shuddered into view twenty feet up, rising on a column of air. *Esanthan'el – Hood's breath, these are D'ivers and Soletaken! A* huge cape-shape swept over the esanthan'el, engulfing them.

Crokus was frantically rummaging in a pack for the short sword he'd purchased in Ehrlitan. Apsalar crouched beside him, daggers glinting in her hands as she faced down the road.

Fiddler was about to shout that the enemy was to her left, when he saw what she'd seen. Three Gral hunters rode shoulder to shoulder in full charge, less than a dozen horse-strides from their position. Their lances lowered.

The range was too close for a safe shot. The sapper could only watch as the warriors closed in. Time seemed to slow down as Fiddler stared, helpless to intervene. A massive bear bolted up from the side of the road, colliding with the Gral rider on the left. The Soletaken was as big as the horse it pulled down. Its jaws closed sideways around the warrior's waist, between ribs and hips, the canines sinking in almost past the far side. The

jaws squeezed seemingly without effort. Bile and blood sprayed from the warrior's mouth.

Apsalar sprang at the other two men, flashing beneath the lanceheads, both knives thrusting up and out as she slipped between the horses. Neither Gral had time to parry. As if in mirror reflection, each blade vanished up and under the ribcage, the one on the left finding a heart, the one on the right rupturing a lung.

Then she was past, leaving both weapons behind. A dive and a shoulder roll avoided the lance of a fourth rider Fiddler hadn't seen earlier. In a single, fluid motion, Apsalar regained her feet and sprang in an astonishing surge of strength, and was suddenly sitting behind the Gral, her right arm closing around his throat, her left reaching down over the man's head, two fingers sinking deep into each eye, then yanking back in time for the small knife that suddenly appeared in her right hand to slide back across the warrior's exposed throat.

Fiddler's rapt attention was violently broken by something large and scaled whipping across his face, knocking him from the saddle, sending his crossbow flying from his hands. He struck the road surface in an explosion of pain. Ribs snapped, the shattered ends grinding and tearing as he rolled onto his stomach. Any thoughts of trying to rise were quickly killed as a vicious battle burst into life directly above him. Hands behind his head, Fiddler curled himself tight, willed himself smaller. Bony hooves battered him, clawed feet scored his chain armour, ravaged his thighs. One sudden push crushed his left ankle, then pivoted on what was left before lifting away.

He heard his horse screaming, not in pain, but in terror and rage. The sound of the gelding's hooves connecting with something solid was a momentary flash of satisfaction amidst the pain flooding Fiddler's mind.

A huge body thumped to the ground beside the sapper, rolling to press a scaled flank against him. He felt the muscles twitching, sending sympathetic shivers through his own pummelled body.

The sounds of battle had ceased. Only the moaning wind and hissing sand was left. He tried to sit up but found he could barely lift his head. The scene was one of carnage. Immediately in front of him, within an arm's reach, stood the four trembling legs of his gelding. Off to one side lay his crossbow, flamer gone – the weapon must have discharged when it struck the ground, catapulting the deadly quarrel into the storm. Just ahead the lung-stabbed Gral lay coughing blood. Standing over him speculatively was Apsalar, the assassin's throat-slitter held loosely in one hand. A dozen paces past her, the hulking brown back of the Soletaken bear was visible, rippling as it tore at the meat of the horse it had brought down. Crokus stepped into view – he'd found his short sword but had yet to unsheathe it. Fiddler felt a wave of compassion at the expression on the lad's face.

The sapper reached one arm behind him, groaning with the effort. His hand found and rested against scaled hide. The twitches had ceased.

The bear roared in sudden alarm. Fiddler twisted around in time to see the beast bolt away. *Oh, Hood, if he's fleeing . . .*

The trembling of the mare's legs increased, making them almost blurry to Fiddler's eyes, but the animal did not run, stepping only to interpose herself between the sapper and whatever was coming. The gesture rent the man's heart. 'Dammit, beast,' he rasped. 'Get out of here!'

Apsalar was backing towards him. Crokus stood motionless, the sword falling unheeded from his hands.

He finally saw the newcomer. *Newcomers.* Like a seething, lumpy black carpet, the D'ivers rolled over the cobbles. *Rats, hundreds. Yet one. Hundreds? Thousands. Oh, Hood,* I *know of this one.* 'Apsalar!'

She glanced at him, expressionless.

'In my saddlebag,' the sapper said. 'A cusser—'

'Not enough,' she said coolly. 'Too late anyway.'

'Not them. Us.'

Her reaction was a slow blink, then she stepped up to the gelding.

A stranger's voice rose above the wailing wind. 'Gryllen!'

Yes, that's the D'ivers's name. Gryllen, otherwise known as the Tide of Madness. Flushed out of Y'ghatan in the fire. Oh, it comes around, don't it just!

'Gryllen!' the voice bellowed again. 'Leave here, D'ivers!'

Hide-bound legs stepped into view. Fiddler looked up, saw an extraordinarily tall man, lean, wearing a faded Tano telaba. His skin was somewhere between grey and green, and he held in his long-fingered hands a recurved bow and a rune-wrapped arrow nocked and ready. His long, grey hair showed remnants of black dye, making his mane appear spotted. The sapper saw the ragged tips of tusks bulging the line of his thin lower lip. A *Jhag. Didn't know they travelled this far east. Why in Hood's name that should matter,* I *don't know.*

The Jhag took another step towards the heaving mass of rats that now covered what was left of the bear-killed horse and rider, and laid a hand on the shoulder of the mare. The trembling stilled. Apsalar stepped back, warily studying the stranger.

Gryllen was hesitating – Fiddler could not believe his eyes. He glanced again at the Jhag. Another figure had appeared beside the tall bowman. Short and wide as a siege engine, his skin a deep, warm brown, his black hair braided and studded with fetishes. If anything, his canines were bigger than his companion's, and looking much sharper. A Trell. A *Jhag and a Trell. That rings a towerful of bells, if only* I *could get through the pain to spare it another thought.*

'Your quarry has fled,' the Jhag said to Gryllen. 'These people here do not pursue the Trail of Hands. Moreover, I now protect them.'

The rats hissed and twittered in a deafening roar, and surged higher on the road. Dust-grey eyes glittered in a seething storm.

'Do not,' the Jhag said slowly, 'try my patience.'

A thousand bodies flinched. The tide withdrew, a wave of greasy fur. A moment later they were gone.

The Trell squatted beside Fiddler. 'You will live, soldier?'

'Seems I'll have to,' the sapper replied, 'if only to make some sense of what just happened. I should know you two, shouldn't I?'

The Trell shrugged. 'Can you stand?'

'Let's see.' He pulled an arm under him, pushed himself up an inch, then remembered nothing more.

CHAPTER EIGHT

> It is said that on the night of Kellanved and Dancer's Return, Malaz City was a maelstrom of sorcery and dire visitations. It is not a far reach to find one sustained in the belief that the assassinations were a messy, confused affair, and that success and failure are judgements dependent on one's perspective...
>
> *Conspiracies in the Imperium*
> Heboric

Coltaine had surprised them all. Leaving the footsoldiers of the Seventh to guard the taking-on of water at Dryj Spring, he had led his Wickans out onto the Odhan. Two hours after sunset, the Tithansi tribesmen, resting their horses by walking with lead reins over a league from the oasis, suddenly found themselves the centre of a closing-horseshoe charge. Few had time to so much as remount, much less wheel in formation to meet the attack. Though they outnumbered the Wickans seven to one, they broke, and died a hundred for every one of Coltaine's clan warriors who fell. Within two hours the slaughter was complete.

Riding the south road towards the oasis, Duiker had seen the glow from the Tithansi's burning wagons way off on his right. It was a long moment before he grasped what he was seeing. There was no question of riding into that conflagration. The Wickans rode the blood of butchery – they would not pause to think before taking him down. Instead he swung his mount northwest and rode at a canter until he ran into the first of the fleeing Tithansi, from whom he gleaned the story.

The Wickans were demons. They breathed fire. Their arrows magically multiplied in mid-air. Their horses fought with uncanny intelligence. A Mezla Ascendant had been conjured and sent to Seven Cities, and now

faced the Whirlwind goddess. The Wickans could not be killed. There would never come another dawn.

Duiker left the man to whatever fate awaited him and rode back to the road, resuming his journey to the oasis. He had lost two hours, but had gleaned invaluable information amidst the Tithansi deserter's terror-spawned ravings.

This, the historian realized as he rode on, was more than the simple lashing-out of a wounded, tormented beast. Coltaine clearly did not view the situation in that way. Perhaps he never did. The Fist was conducting a campaign. Engaged in a war, not a panicked flight. *The leaders of the Apocalypse had better reorder their thoughts, if they're to hold any hope of wresting the fangs from this serpent. More, they'd better kill the notion evidently already rampant that the Wickans were more than just human, and that's easier said than done.*

Kamist Reloe still retained superior numbers, but the quality of the troops was beginning to tell – Coltaine's Wickans were disciplined in their mayhem, and the Seventh was a veteran force that the new Fist had taken pains in preparing for this kind of war. There was still the likelihood that the Malazan forces would be destroyed eventually – if things were as bad elsewhere, there'd be little hope for the stranded army and the thousands of refugees that clung to it. All *these minor victories cannot win the war – Reloe's potential recruits number in the hundreds of thousands – assuming Sha'ik recognizes the threat Coltaine poses and sends them in pursuit of the High Fist.*

When he came within sight of the small oasis surrounding Dryj Spring, he was shocked to see that almost every palm tree had been cut down. The stands were gone, leaving only stumps and low plants. Smoke drifted over the area, ghostly under the paling sky. Duiker rose in his stirrups, scanning for campfires, pickets, the tents of the encampment. *Nothing . . . perhaps on the other side of the spring . . .*

The smoke thickened as he rode into the oasis, his mount picking its way around the hacked stumps. There were signs everywhere – first the pits dug into the sand by the outlying picket stations, then the deep ruts where

wagons had been positioned in a defensive line. In the hearth-places only smouldering ashes remained.

Dumbfounded and suddenly exhausted, Duiker let his horse wander through the abandoned camp. The deep sinkhole beyond was the spring – it had been virtually emptied and was only now beginning to refill: a small brownish pool surrounded by the mud-coated husks of palm bark and rotting fronds. Even the fish had been taken.

While the Wickan horsewarriors had set off to ambush the Tithansi, the Seventh and the refugees had already left the oasis. The historian struggled to comprehend that fact. He envisioned the scene of departure, the stumbling, red-eyed refugees, children piled onto wagons, the stricken gazes of the veteran soldiers guarding the exodus. Coltaine gave them no rest, no pause to assimilate the shock, to come to terms with all that had happened, *was* happening. They'd arrived, stripped the oasis of water and everything else that might prove useful, then they'd left.

Where?

Duiker nudged his mount forward. He came to the oasis's southwestern edge, his eyes tracking the wide swath left behind by the wagons, cattle and horses. Off to the southeast rose the weathered range of the Lador Hills. Westward stretched the Tithansi Steppes. *Nothing in that direction until the Sekala River – too far for Coltaine to contemplate. If northwest, then the village of Manot, and beyond* that, *Caron Tepasi, on the coast of the Karas Sea. Almost as far as Sekala River.* The trail led due west, into the steppes. *Hood's breath, there's nothing there!*

There seemed little point in trying to anticipate the Wickan Fist. The historian wheeled back to the spring and stiffly dismounted, wincing at the ache in his hips and thighs, the dull throb in his lower back. He could go no farther, nor could his horse. They needed to rest – and they needed the soupy water at the bottom of the lakebed.

He removed his bedroll from the saddle, tossing it onto the leaf-strewn sand. Unhitching the mare's girth strap, he slid the ornate saddle from its sweat-covered back. Taking the reins, he led the animal down to the water.

The spring had been plugged with rocks, which explained its slowed trickle. Duiker removed his scarf and strained the water through the fabric into his helmet. He let the horse drink first, then repeated the filtering process before quenching his own thirst and refilling his canteen.

He fed the mare from the bag of grain strapped to the saddle, then rubbed the beast down before turning his attention to setting up his own makeshift camp. He wondered whether he would ever rejoin Coltaine and the army; whether, perhaps, he was trapped in some nightmarish pursuit of ghosts. *Maybe they are demons, after all.* His weariness was getting the better of him.

Duiker laid out the bedroll, then rigged over it a sunshade using his telaba. Without the trees the sun would scorch this oasis – it would be years in recovering, if it ever did. Before sleep took him, he thought long on the war to come. Cities meant less than did sources of water. Armies would have to occupy oases, which would become as important as islands in a vast sea. Coltaine would ever be at a disadvantage – his every destination known, his every approach prepared for ... *provided Kamist* Reloe *can get to them first, and how can he fail in that? He doesn't have thousands of refugees to escort.* For all the Fist's surprises, Coltaine was tactically constrained.

The question the historian asked himself before falling asleep held a blunt finality: how long could Coltaine delay the inevitable?

He awoke at dusk, and twenty minutes later was on the trail, a solitary rider beneath a vast cloak of capemoths so thick as to blot out the stars.

Breakers rolled over a reef a quarter of a mile out, a phosphorescent ribbon beneath a cloud-filled sky. The sun's rise was an hour away. Felisin stood on a grassy shelf overlooking a vast beach of white sand, light-headed and weaving slightly as the minutes passed.

There was no boat in sight, no sign that anyone had ever set foot on this stretch of coast. Driftwood and heaps of dead seaweed marked the tide line. Sand crabs crawled everywhere she looked.

'Well,' Heboric said beside her, 'at least we can eat. Assuming those are edible, that is, and there's only one way to find out.'

She watched as he removed a sackcloth from the pack, then made his way down onto the sand. 'Watch those claws,' she said to him. 'Wouldn't want to lose a finger, would we?'

The ex-priest laughed, continuing on. She could see him only because of his clothes. His skin was now completely black, the traceries barely detectable even up close and in daylight. The visible changes were matched by other, more subtle ones.

'You can't hurt him any more,' Baudin said from where he crouched over the other backpack. 'No matter what you say.'

'Then I've no reason to stay quiet,' she replied.

They had water to last another day, maybe two. The clouds over the straits promised rain, but Felisin knew every promise was a lie – salvation was for others. She looked around again. This *is where our bones will rest, humps and ripples in the sand. Then, one day, even those signs will be gone. We've reached the shore, where Hood awaits and no-one else. A journey of the spirit as much as of the flesh.* I *welcome the end to both.*

Baudin had pitched the tents and was now collecting wood for a fire. Heboric returned with the sackcloth gripped between his stumps. The tips of claws showed through the bag's loose weave. 'These will either kill us or make us very thirsty – I'm not sure which will be worse.'

The last fresh water was eleven hours behind them, a damp patch in a shallow basin. They'd had to dig down an arm-span to find it, and it had proved brackish, tasting of iron and difficult to keep down. 'Do you truly believe Duiker's still out there, sailing back and forth for – what, five days now?'

Heboric squatted, setting the sack down. 'He's not published anything in years – what else would he have to do with all his time?'

'Do you think frivolity is the proper way to meet Hood?'

'I didn't know there was a proper way, lass. Even if I was certain death was coming – which I'm not, at least in the immediate future – well, each of us has to answer it in our own way. After all, even the priests of Hood argue over the preferred manner in which to finally face their god.'

'If I'd known a lecture was coming, I'd have kept my mouth shut.'

'Coming to terms with life as an adolescent, are you?'

Her scowl made him laugh in delight.

Heboric's favourite jokes are the unintended ones. Mockery is just hate's patina, and every laugh is vicious. She didn't have the strength to continue riposting. *The last laugh won't be yours, Heboric. You'll discover that soon enough. You and Baudin both.*

They cooked the crabs in a bed of coals, needing sticks to push the creatures back into the searing heat until their struggles ceased. The white flesh was delicious, but salty. A bounteous feast and an endless supply that could prove fatal.

Baudin then collected more driftwood, intending to build a beacon fire for the night to come. In the meantime, as the sun broke the eastern skyline, he piled damp seaweed on the fire and studied with a satisfied expression the column of smoke that rose into the air.

'You planning to do that all day?' Felisin asked. *What about sleep? I need you sleeping, Baudin.*

'Every now and then,' he replied.

'Don't see the point if those clouds roll in.'

'They ain't rolled in yet, have they? If anything, they're rolling out – back to the mainland.'

She watched him working the fire. He'd lost the economy of his movements, she realized; there was now a sloppiness there that betrayed the extremity of his exhaustion, a weakness that probably came with finally reaching the coast. They'd lost any control over their fates. *Baudin believed in Baudin and* no-one *else. Now just like us he's depending on someone*

else. And maybe it was all for nothing. Maybe we should've taken our chances going to Dosin Pali.

The crab meat began taking its toll. Waves of desperate thirst assailed Felisin, followed by sharp cramps as her stomach rebelled at being full.

Heboric disappeared inside his tent, clearly suffering the same symptoms.

Felisin did little over the next twenty minutes, simply clawing through the pain and watching Baudin, willing on him the same affliction. If he was similarly assailed he showed no sign. Her fear of him deepened.

The cramps faded, although the thirst remained. The clouds over the straits retreated, the sun's heat rose.

Baudin dumped a last pile of seaweed on the fire, then made ready to retire to the tent.

'Take mine,' Felisin said.

His head jerked around, his eyes narrowing.

'I'll join you in a moment.'

He still stared.

'Why not?' she snapped. 'What other escape is there? Unless you've taken vows—'

He flinched almost imperceptibly.

Felisin went on, '- sworn to some sex-hating Ascendant. Who would that be? Hood? Wouldn't that be a surprise! But there's always a little death in lovemaking—'

'That what you call it?' Baudin muttered. 'Lovemaking?'

She shrugged.

'I'm sworn to no god.'

'So you've said before. Yet you've never made use of me, Baudin. Do you prefer men? Boys? Throw me on my stomach and you won't know the

difference.'

He straightened, still staring, his expression unreadable. Then he walked to the tent. Felisin's tent.

She smiled to herself, waited a hundred heartbeats, then joined him.

His hands moved over her clumsily, as if he was trying to be gentle but did not know how. The rags of their clothing had taken but moments to remove. Baudin guided her down until she lay on her back, looking up at his blunt, bearded face, his eyes still cold and unfathomable as his large hands gathered her breasts and pushed them together.

As soon as he was inside her, his restraint fell away. He became something other than human, reduced to an animal. He was rough, but not as rough as Beneth had been, nor a good number of Beneth's followers.

He was quickly done, settling his considerable weight on her, his breath harsh and heavy in her ear. She did not move him; her every sense was attuned to his breathing, to the twitching of muscles as sleep stole up on him. She had not expected him to surrender so easily, she had not anticipated his helplessness.

Felisin's hand stole into the sands beside the pallet and probed until it found the grip of the dagger. She willed calm into her own breathing, though she could do nothing to slow her hammering heart. He was asleep. He did not stir.

She slipped the blade free, shifting her grasp to angle the point inward. She drew a deep breath, held it.

His hand caught her wrist the instant she began her thrust. He rose fluidly, wrenching her arm around and twisting her until she rolled onto her stomach beneath him. His weight pinned her down.

Baudin squeezed her wrist until the dagger fell free. 'You think I don't check my gear, lass?' he whispered. 'You think you're a mystery to me? Who else would steal one of my throat-stickers?'

'You left Beneth to die.' She couldn't see his face, and was almost glad for that when he replied.

'No, lass. I killed the bastard myself. Snapped his neck like a reed. He deserved more pain, something slower, but there wasn't any time for that. He didn't deserve the mercy, but he got it.'

'Who *are* you?'

'Never done a man or a boy. But I'll pretend. I'm good at pretending.'

'I'll scream—'

'Heboric's sleep isn't the kind you can shake him out of. He dreams. He thrashes about. I've slapped him and he didn't stir. So scream away. What are screams anyway? Voicing your outrage – didn't think you were capable of outrage any more, Felisin.'

She felt the hopelessness flood through her body. *It's just more of the same. I can survive it, I can even enjoy it. If I try.*

Baudin rose from her. She writhed onto her back, stared at him. He'd collected the dagger and had backed to the entrance. He smiled. 'Sorry if I disappointed you, but I wasn't in the mood.'

'Then why—'

'To see if you're still what you were.' He did not need to voice his conclusion. 'Get some sleep, lass.'

Alone, Felisin curled up on the pallet, numbness filling her. *To see if you're still ... yes, you still are. Baudin knew that already. He just wanted to show you to yourself, girl. You thought you were using him hut he was using you. He knew what you planned. Think on that. Think on it long and hard.*

Hood came striding out of the waves, the reaper of carved-out souls. He'd waited long enough, his amusement at their suffering losing its flavour. Time had come for the Gates.

Feeling bleached and withered as the dead driftwood around her, Felisin sat facing the straits. Clouds flickered over the water, lightning danced to the rumbling beat of thunder. Spume rose fierce along the line of the reef, launching blue-white explosions into the darkness.

An hour earlier Heboric and Baudin had come back from their walk up the beach, dragging between them the prow of a shattered boat. It was old, but they'd talked about building a raft. The discussion had the sound of pointless musing – no-one had the strength for such a task. They would start dying by dawn, and they all knew it.

Felisin realized that Baudin would be the last to die. Unless Heboric's god returned to scoop up his wayward child. Felisin finally began to believe she would be the first. No vengeance achieved. Not Baudin, not sister Tavore, not the entire Hood-warped Malazan Empire.

A strange wave of lightning leapt up beyond the breakers hammering the reef. It played out tumbling and pitching as if wrapped around an invisible log leagues long and thirty paces thick. The crackling spears struck the sheets of spume with a searing hiss. Thunder slapped the beach hard enough to shiver the sand. The lightning rolled on, straight towards them.

Heboric was suddenly at her side, his froglike face split wide in a grimace of fear. 'That's sorcery, lass! Run!'

Her laugh was a harsh bark. She made no move. 'It'll be quick, old man!'

Wind howled.

Heboric spun to face the approaching wave. He snarled a curse that was flung away by the growing roar, then interposed himself between Felisin and the sorcery. Baudin crouched down beside her, his face lit in a blue glow that intensified as the lightning reached the shore, then rolled up to them.

It shattered around Heboric as if he was a spire of rock. The old man staggered, his tattoos a tracery of fire that flared bright, then vanished.

The sorcery was gone. For all its threat, it swiftly died up and down the beach.

Heboric sagged, settling on his knees in the sand. 'Not me,' he said in the sudden silence. 'Otataral. Of course. Nothing to fear. Nothing at all.'

'There!' Baudin shouted.

A boat had somehow cleared the reef and now raced towards them, its lone sail aflame. Sorcery stabbed at the craft from all sides like vipers, then fell away as the boat neared shore. A moment later it scraped bottom and slid to a halt, canting to one side as it settled. Two figures were at the ratlines in an instant, cutting away the burning sail. The cloth swept down like a wing of flame, instantly doused as it struck the water. Two other men leapt down and waded onto shore.

'Which one's Duiker?' Felisin asked.

Heboric shook his head. 'Neither, but the one on the left is a mage.'

'How can you tell?'

He made no reply.

The two men swiftly approached, both staggering in exhaustion. The mage, a small, red-faced man wearing a singed cape, was the first to speak – in Malazan. 'Thank the gods! We need your help.'

Somewhere beyond the reef waited an unknown mage – a man unconnected to the rebellion, a stranger trapped within his own nightmare. As the vortex of a savage storm, he had risen from the deep on the second day out. Kulp had never before felt such unrestrained power. Its very wildness was all that saved them, as the madness that gripped the sorcerer tore and flayed his warren. There was no control, the warren's wounds gushed, the winds howled with the mage's own shrieks.

The *Ripath* was flung about like a piece of bark in a cascading mountain stream. At first Kulp countered with illusions – believing he and his companions were the object of the mage's wrath – but it quickly became apparent that the insane wielder was oblivious to them, fighting an altogether different war. Kulp contracted his own warren into a protective

shell around *Ripath*, then, as Gesler and his crewmen struggled to keep the craft upright, he crouched down to withstand the onslaught.

The unleashed sorcery instinctively hunted them and no illusion could deceive something so thoroughly mindless. They became its lodestone, the attacks endless and wildly fluctuating in strength, battering Kulp relentlessly for two days and nights.

They were driven westward, towards the Otataral shores. The mage's power assailed that coastline, with little effect, and Kulp finally began to make sense of it – the mage's mind must have been destroyed by Otataral. Likely an escaped miner, a prisoner of war who had scaled the walls only to find he took his prison with him. Losing control of his warren, it had then taken control of him. It surged with power far beyond anything the mage himself had ever wielded.

The realization left Kulp horrified. The storm threatened to fling them onto that shore. Was the same fate awaiting him?

Gesler and his crew's skill was all that kept the *Ripath* from striking the reef. For eleven hours they managed to sail parallel to the razor-sharp rocks beneath the breakers.

On the third night Kulp sensed a change. The coastline on their right – which he had felt as an impenetrable wall of negation, the bloodless presence of Otataral – suddenly ... *softened. A* power resided there, bruising the will of the magic-deadening ore, pushing it back on all sides.

There was a cut in the reef. It gave them, Kulp decided, their only chance. Rising from where he crouched amidships, he shouted to Gesler. The corporal grasped his meaning instantly, with desperate relief. They had been losing the struggle to exhaustion, to the overwhelming stress of watching sorcery speed towards them, only to wash over Kulp's protective magic – a protection they could see weakening with every pass.

Another attack came, even as they swept between the jagged breakers, sundering Kulp's resistance. Flame lit the storm-jib, the lines, the sail. Had any of the men been dry they would have become beacons of fire. As it

was, the sorcery swept over them in a wave of hissing steam, then was gone, striking the shore and rolling up the beach until it fizzled out.

Kulp had half expected that the strangely blunted effect on this part of shore was in some way connected to the man he was sent to find, and so was not surprised to see three figures emerge from the gloom beyond the beach. Weary as he was, something about the way the three stood in relation to each other jangled alarms in his head. Circumstances had forced them together, and expedience cared little for the bonds of friendship. Yet it was more than that.

The motionless ground beneath his feet was making him dizzy. When Kulp's weary gaze fell on the handless priest, a wave of relief washed through him, and there was nothing ironic in his call for help.

The ex-priest answered it with a dried-out laugh.

'Get them water,' the mage said to Gesler. The corporal pulled his eyes from Heboric with difficulty, then nodded and spun about. Truth had swung down to inspect *Ripath's* hull for damage, while Stormy sat perched on the prow, his crossbow cradled in his arms. The corporal shouted for one of the water casks. Truth clambered back into the boat to retrieve it.

'Where's Duiker?' Heboric asked.

Kulp frowned. 'Not sure. We went our separate ways in a village north of Hissar. The Apocalypse—'

'We know. Dosin Pali was ablaze the night we escaped the pit.'

'Yeah, well.' Kulp studied the other two. The big man lacking an ear met his eyes coolly. Despite the ravages of deprivation evident in his bearing, there was a measure of self-control to him that made the mage uneasy. He was clearly more than the scarred dockyard thug he first took him for.

The young girl was no less disturbing, though in a way Kulp could not define. He sighed. Worry *about it later. Worry about everything later.*

Truth arrived with the water cask, Gesler a step behind him.

The three escapees converged on the young marine as he breached the cask, then held the tin cup that was tied to it and splashed it full of water.

'Go slow on that,' Kulp said. 'Sips, not gulps.'

As he watched them drink, the mage sought out his warren. It felt slippery, elusive, yet he was able to take hold, stealing power to bolster his senses. When he looked again upon Heboric he almost shouted in surprise. The ex-priest's tattoos swarmed with a life of their own: flickering waves of power raced across his body and spun a handlike projection beyond the stump of his left wrist. That ghost-hand reached into a warren, was clenched as if gripping a tether. A wholly different power pulsed around his right stump, shot through with veins of green and Otataral red, as if two snakes writhed in mortal combat. The blunting effect arose exclusively from the green bands, radiating outward with what felt like conscious will. That it was strong enough to push back the effects of the Otataral was astonishing.

Denul healers often described diseases as waging war, with the flesh as the battleground, which their warren gave them sight to see. Kulp wondered if he wasn't seeing something similar. But *not a disease. A battle of warrens – Fener's own, linked by one ghostly hand, the other ensnared by Otataral, yet waxing nonetheless – a warren I can't recognize, a force alien to every sense I possess.* He blinked. Heboric was staring at him, a faint smile on his broad mouth.

'What in Hood's name has happened to you?' Kulp demanded.

The ex-priest shrugged. 'I wish I knew.'

The three marines now approached Heboric. 'I'm Gesler,' the corporal said in gruff deference. 'We're all that's left of the Boar Cult.'

The old man's smile faded. 'That would make three too many.' He turned away and strode off to retrieve a pair of backpacks.

Gesler stared after him, expressionless.

That man recovers damned quick. The boy Truth had gasped at the harsh words of a man he took to be his god's priest. Kulp saw something

crumbling into ruins behind the lad's light-blue eyes. Stormy revealed the dark clouds that likely gave reason to his name, but he laid a hand on Truth's shoulder a moment before facing the one-eared man.

'Your hands keep hovering over those hidden blades and I'm gonna get nervous,' he said in a low growl, shifting grip on his crossbow.

'That's Baudin,' the young woman said. 'He murders people. Old women, rivals. You name them, he's got their blood on his hands. Isn't that right, Baudin?' Without awaiting a reply she went on, 'I'm Felisin, House of Paran. Last in the line. But don't let any of that fool you.'

She did not elaborate.

Heboric returned with a pack slung over each forearm. He set them down, then moved close to Kulp. 'We're in no shape to help you, but after crossing this damned desert the thought of death by drowning is oddly appealing.' He stared out over the thrashing waves. 'What's out there?'

'Imagine a child holding a leash and at the other end is a Hound of Shadow. The child's the mage, the Hound's his warren. Too long in the mines before making his escape, is my guess. We need to rest before trying to run his storm again.'

'How bad are things on the mainland?'

Kulp shrugged. 'I don't know. We saw Hissar in flames. Duiker went to rejoin Coltaine and the Seventh – that old man's got a streak of optimism that'll get him stuck on a sliding bed. I'd say the Seventh's history, and so's Coltaine and his Wickans.'

'Ah, *that* Coltaine. When I was chained at the base of the crevasse behind Laseen's Palace I half expected to meet the man as a neighbour. Hood knows there was worthy enough company down there.' After a moment he shook his head. 'Coltaine's alive, Mage. You don't kill men like that easily.'

'If that's true, then I'm bound to rejoin him.'

Heboric nodded.

'He was excommunicated,' Felisin said loudly.

Both men turned to see Gesler facing the girl. She continued, 'More than that, he's the bane of his own god. Of yours, I gather. Beware scorned priests. You'll have to lead your own prayers to Fener, lads, and I'd advise you to pray. A lot.'

The ex-priest swung back to Kulp with a sigh. 'You opened your warren to look upon me. What did you see?'

Kulp scowled. 'I saw,' he said after a moment, 'a child dragging a Hound as big as a Hood-damned mountain. In one hand.'

Heboric's expression tightened. 'And in the other?'

'Sorry,' Kulp replied, 'no easy answer there.'

'I'd let go ...'

'If you could.'

Heboric nodded.

Kulp lowered his voice. 'If Gesler realized ...'

'He'd cut me loose.'

'Messily.'

'I take it we're understood,' Heboric said with a faint smile.

'Not really, but I'll let it lie for now.'

The ex-priest acknowledged him with a nod.

'Did you choose your company here, Heboric?' Kulp asked, eyes on Baudin and Felisin.

'Aye, I did. More or less. Hard to believe, isn't it?'

'Walk up the beach with me,' the mage said, heading off. The tattooed man followed. 'Tell me about them,' Kulp said after they'd gone a distance.

Heboric shrugged. 'You have to compromise to stay alive in the mines,' he said. 'And that which one person thinks of value, another is the first to sell.

Cheap. Well, that's what they are now. What they were before ...' He shrugged again.

'Do you trust them?'

Heboric's wide face split in a grin. 'Do you trust me, Kulp? I know, it's too soon to answer that. Yours is not an easy question. I trust Baudin to work with us so long as it's in his interest to do so.'

'And the girl?'

The old man was a long time in answering. 'No.'

Not what I'd expected. This should have been the easy part. 'All right,' he said.

'And what of your companions? Those foolish men and their foolish cult?'

'Harsh words for a priest of Fener—'

'An excommunicated priest. The girl spoke the truth. My soul is my own, not Fener's. I took it back.'

'Didn't know that was possible.'

'Maybe it isn't. Please, I can walk no farther, Mage. Our journey has been ... difficult.'

You're not the only one, old man.

They shared no more words on the way back to the others. For all the chaos of the crossing, Kulp had expected this part of the plan to be relatively straightforward. They would come to the coast. They would find Duiker's friend waiting ... or not. He'd fought down his misgivings when the historian first came to him, asking for help. *I diot.* Well, he would take them off this damned island, deposit them on the mainland, and that would be that. It was all he'd been asked to do.

The sun was rising, the sorcerous storm over the sea withdrawing from shore to boil black and bruised over the middle of the straits.

Food had been brought from *Ripath*. Heboric joined his two companions in a silent, tense meal. Kulp strode to where Gesler sat watch over his two sleeping soldiers, the three of them beneath a square of sailcloth rigged on four poles.

The corporal's scarred face twisted into an ironic grin. 'Fener's joke, this one,' he said.

Kulp squatted down beside the corporal. 'Glad you're enjoying it.'

'The boar god's humour ain't the laughing kind, Mage. Strange, though, I could've sworn the Lord of Summer was... *here*. Like a crow on that priest's shoulder.'

'You've felt Fener's touch before, Gesler?'

The man shook his head. 'Gifts don't come my way. Never did. It was just a feeling, that's all.'

'Still have it?'

'I don't think so. Don't know. Doesn't matter.'

'How's Truth?'

'Took it hard, finding a priest of Fener who then turns around and denies us all. He'll be all right – me and Stormy, we look out for him. Now it's your turn to answer some questions. How're we getting back to the mainland? That damned wizard's still out there, ain't he?'

'The priest will see us through.'

'How's that?'

'That'd be a long explanation, Corporal, and all *I* can think of right now is sleep. I'll take next watch.' He rose and went off to find some shade of his own.

Wide awake, arms wrapped around herself, Felisin watched the mage rig a sunshade, then slip beneath it to sleep. She glanced over at the marines,

feeling a wave of gleeful disdain. Followers *of Fener, that's a faugh. The boar god with nothing between his ears. Hey, you fools, Fener's here, somewhere, cowering in the mortal realm. Ripe for any hunter with a sharp spear. We saw his hoof. You can thank that old man for that. Thank him any way you care to.*

Baudin had gone down to the water to wash himself. He now returned, his beard dripping.

'Scared yet, Baudin?' Felisin asked. 'Look at that soldier over there, the one that's awake. Too tough for you by far. And that one with the crossbow – didn't take him long to figure you out, did it? Hard men – harder than you —'

Baudin drawled, 'What, you bedded them already?'

'You used me—'

'What of it, girl? You've made being used a way of life.'

'Hood take you, bastard!'

Standing over her, he grunted a laugh. 'You won't pull me down – we're getting off this island. We've survived it. Nothing you can say's going to change my mood, girl. Nothing.'

'What's the talon signify, Baudin?'

His face became an expressionless mask.

'You know, the one you've got hidden away, along with all your thieving tools.'

The man's flat gaze flicked past her. She turned to find Heboric standing a few paces away. The ex-priest's eyes were fixed on Baudin as he said, 'Did I hear that right?'

The one-eared man said nothing.

She watched what had to be comprehension sweep across Heboric's face, watched as he glanced down at her, then back to Baudin. After a moment, he smiled. 'Well done,' he said. 'So far.'

'You really think so?' Baudin asked, then turned away.

'What's going on, Heboric?' Felisin demanded.

'You should have paid better attention to your history tutors, lass.'

'Explain.'

'Like Hood I will.' He shambled off.

Felisin wrapped herself tighter in her own arms, pivoting to face the straits. *We're dive. I can be patient again. I can bide my time.* The mainland burned with rebellion against the Malazan Empire. A pleasing thought. Maybe it would pull it all down – the Empire, the Empress ... the Adjunct. And without the Malazan Empire, peace would once again come. An *end to repression, an end to the threat of restraint as I set about exacting revenge. The day you lose your bodyguards, sister Tavore, I will appear. I swear it, by every god and* every *demon lord that ever existed.* In the meantime, she would have to make use of these people around her, she would have to get them on her side. Not Baudin or Heboric – it was too late for them. But the others. The mage, the soldiers ...

Felisin rose.

The corporal watched her approach with sleepy eyes.

'When did you last lie with a woman?' Felisin asked him.

It was not Gesler who answered, however. The cross-bowman's – Stormy's – voice drifted out from the shadow beneath the sailcloth: 'That would be a year and a day, the night I dressed up as a Kanese harlot – had Gesler fooled for hours. Mind you, he was pretty drunk. Mind you, so was I.'

The corporal grunted. 'That's a soldier's life for you. Too thick to know the difference .. .'

'Too drunk to care,' the crossbowman finished.

'You got it, Stormy.' Gesler's heavy eyes slid up to Felisin. 'Play your games elsewhere, lass. No offence, but we've done enough rutting to know

when an offer's got hidden chains. You can't buy what ain't for sale, anyhow.'

'I told you about Heboric,' she said. 'I didn't have to.'

'Hear that, Stormy? The girl took pity on us.'

'He'll betray you. He despises you already.'

The boy named Truth sat up at that.

'Go away,' Gesler told her. 'My men are trying to get some sleep.'

Felisin met Truth's startling blue eyes, saw nothing but innocence in them. She threw him a pouty kiss, smiled as colour flooded his face. 'Careful or those ears will catch fire,' she said.

'Hood's breath,' Stormy muttered. 'Go on, lad. She wants it that bad. Give her a taste.'

'Not a chance,' she said, turning away. 'I only sleep with men.'

'Fools, you mean,' Gesler corrected, an edge to his tone.

Felisin strode down to the beach, walked out until the waves lapped her knees. She studied the *Ripath.* Flashburns painted the hull black in thick, random streaks. The front railing of the forecastle glittered as if the wood had been studded with a hail of quartz. The lines were frayed, unravelled where knives had cut.

The sun's reflection off the water was blinding. She closed her eyes, let her mind fall away until there was nothing but the feel of the warm water slipping around her legs. She felt an exhaustion that was beyond physical. She could not stop herself lashing out, and every face she made turn her way became a mirror. *There has to be a way to reflect something other than hate and contempt.*

No, not a way.

A reason.

'My hope is that the Otataral entwined in you is enough to drive away that insane mage,' Kulp said. 'Otherwise, we're in for a rough voyage.' Truth had lit a lantern and now crouched in the triangular forecastle, waiting for them to set out for the reef. The yellow light caught reflective glimmers in Heboric's tattoos as he grimaced in response to Kulp's words.

Gesler sat leaning over the steering oar. Like everyone else, he was waiting for the ex-priest. Waiting for a small measure of hope.

The sorcerous storm raged beyond the reef, its manic flashes lighting up the night, revealing tumbling black clouds over a frothing sea.

'If you say so,' Heboric eventually said.

'Not good enough—'

'Best I can do,' the old man snapped. He raised one stump, jabbed it in front of Kulp. 'You see what I can't even feel, Mage!'

The mage swung to Gesler. 'Well, Corporal?'

The soldier shrugged. 'We got a choice?'

'It's not that simple,' Kulp said, fighting to stay calm. 'With Heboric aboard I don't even know if I can open my warren – he's got taints to him I wouldn't want spreading. Without my warren I can't deflect that sorcery. Meaning—'

'We get roasted crisp,' Gesler said, nodding. 'Look alive up there, Truth. We're heading out!'

'Yours is a misplaced faith, Corporal,' Heboric said.

'Knew you'd say that. Now everyone stay low – me and Stormy and the lad got work to do.'

Although he sat within arm's reach of the tattooed old man, Kulp could sense his own warren. It felt ready – almost eager – for release. The mage was frightened. Meanas was a remote warren, and every fellow practitioner Kulp had met characterized it the same way: cool, detached, amused intelligence. The game of illusions was played with light, dark, texture and

shadows, crowing victory when it succeeded in deceiving an eye, but even that triumph felt emotionless, the satisfaction clinical. Accessing the warren always had the feel of interrupting a power busy with other things. As if shaping a small fraction of that power was a distraction barely worth acknowledging.

Kulp did not trust his warren's uncharacteristic attentiveness. It wanted to join the game. He knew he was falling into the trap of thinking of Meanas as an entity, a faceless god, where access was worship, success a reward of faith. Warrens were not like that. A mage was not a priest and magic was not divine intervention. Sorcery could be the ladder to Ascendancy – a means to an end, but there was no point to worshipping the means.

Stormy had rigged a small, square sail, enough to give control but not so large that it would risk the weakened mast. The *Ripath* slipped forward in front of a mild shore breeze. Truth lay on the bowsprit, scanning the breakers ahead. The cut they'd come in through was proving hard to find. Gesler barked out commands and swung the craft to run parallel to the reef.

Kulp glanced at Heboric. The ex-priest sat with his left shoulder against the mast, squinting out into the darkness. The mage was desperate to open his warren – to look upon the old man's ghost-hands, to gauge the serpent of Otataral – but he held back, suspicious of his own curiosity.

'There!' Truth shouted, pointing.

'I see it!' Gesler bellowed. 'Move it, Stormy!'

The *Ripath* swung around, bow wheeling to face the breakers ... and a gap that Kulp could barely make out. The wind picked up, the sail stretching taut.

Beyond it, the billowing clouds twisted, creating an inverted funnel. Lightning leapt up from the waves to frame it. The *Ripath* slipped through the reef and plunged directly into the spinning vortex.

Kulp did not even have time to scream. His warren opened, locking in instant battle with a power demonic in its fury. Spears of water slanted down from overhead, shredding the sail in moments. They struck the deck

like quarrels, punching through the planks. Kulp saw one shaft pierce Stormy's thigh, pinning him shrieking to the deck. Others shattered against Heboric's hunched back – he had thrown himself over the girl, Felisin, shielding her as the spears rained down. His tattoos raged with fire the colour of mud-smeared gold.

Baudin had hurled himself onto the forecastle, one arm reaching down and out of sight. Truth was nowhere to be seen.

The spears vanished. Pitching as if on a single surging wave, the *Ripath* lurched forward, stern lifting. Overhead the sky raged, bruised and flushing with blooms of power. Kulp's eyes widened as he stared up – a tiny figure rode the storm above, limbs flailing, the fragments of a cloak whipping about like a tattered wing. Sorcery flung the figure around as if it was no more than a straw-stuffed doll. Blood exploded outward as a coruscating wave engulfed the hapless creature. When the wave swept past, the figure rolled and tumbled after it, webs of blood spreading out like a fisherman's net behind it.

Then it was falling.

Gesler pushed past Kulp. 'Take the oar!' he yelled above the roaring wind.

The mage scrambled aft. Steer? Steer *through what?* He was certain it was not water carrying them. They'd plunged into a madman's warren. Closing his hands around the oar's handle, he felt his own warren flow down into the wood and take hold. The pitching steadied. Kulp grunted. There was no time to wonder – being appalled demanded all his attention.

Gesler clambered forward, grasping Baudin's ankles just as the big man started to slip over the bow. Pulling him back revealed that Baudin held, with one hand, onto Truth, his fingers wrapped in the lad's belt. Blood streamed from that hand, and Baudin's face was white with pain.

The unseen wave beneath them slumped. The *Ripath* charged forward into dead calm. Silence.

Heboric scrambled to Stormy. The marine lay motionless on the deck, blood gushing in horrifying amounts from his punctured thigh. The flow

lost its fierceness even as Kulp watched.

Heboric did the only thing he could, or so Kulp would remember it in retrospect. At that instant, however, the mage screamed a warning – but too late – as Heboric plunged a ghostly, loam-smeared hand directly into the wound.

Stormy spasmed, giving a bark of pain. The tattoos flowed out from Heboric's wrist to spread a glowing pattern on the soldier's thigh.

When the old man pulled his arm away, the wound closed, the tattoos knitting together like sutures. Heboric scrambled back, eyes wide with shock.

A hissing sigh escaped Stormy's grimacing lips. Trembling and bone white, he sat up. Kulp blinked. He'd seen something more than just healing pass from Heboric's arm into Stormy. Whatever it had been, it was virulent and tinged with madness. *Worry about it later – the man's alive, isn't he?* The mage's attention swung to where Gesler and Baudin knelt on either side of a prone, motionless Truth. The corporal had turned the lad onto his stomach and was rhythmically pushing down with both hands to expel the water that filled Truth's lungs. After a moment the boy coughed.

The *Ripath* sat heavily, listing to one side. The uniform grey sky hung close and faintly luminous over them. They were becalmed, the only sound coming from water pouring into the hold somewhere below.

Gesler helped Truth sit up. Baudin, still on his knees, clutched his right hand in his lap. Kulp saw that all the fingers had been pulled from their joints, skin split and streaming blood.

'Heboric,' the mage whispered.

The old man's head jerked around. He was drawing breath in rapid gasps.

'Tend to Baudin with that healing touch,' Kulp said quietly. *We won't think about what comes with it.* 'If you can ...'

'No,' Baudin growled, studying Heboric intently. 'Don't want your god's touch on me, old man.'

'Those joints need resetting,' Kulp said.

'Gesler can do it. The hard way.'

The corporal looked up, then nodded and moved over.

Felisin spoke. 'Where are we?'

Kulp shrugged. 'Not sure. But we're sinking.'

'She's stove through,' Stormy said. 'Four, five places.' The soldier stared down at the tattoos covering his thigh and frowned.

The young woman struggled to her feet, one hand reaching out to grip the charred mast. The slant of the deck had sharpened.

'She might capsize,' Stormy said, still studying the tattoos. 'Any time now.'

Kulp's warren subsided. He slumped in sudden exhaustion. He wouldn't last long in the water, he knew.

Baudin grunted as Gesler set the first finger of his right hand. The corporal spoke as he moved on to the next one. 'Rig up some casks, Stormy. If you can walk, that is. Divide up the fresh water among them. Felisin, get the emergency food stores – that's the chest on this side of the forecastle. Take the whole thing.' Baudin moaned as he set the next finger. 'Truth, you up to getting some bandages?'

His dry heaves having stopped a few moments earlier, the boy slowly pushed himself to his hands and knees and starting crawling aft.

Kulp glanced at Felisin. She had not moved in response to Gesler's orders and seemed to be debating a few choice words. 'Come on, lass,' Kulp said, rising, 'I'll give you a hand.'

Stormy's fears of capsizing were not realized: as the *Ripath* settled, the cant slowly diminished. Water had filled the hold and now lapped the hatch, thick as soup and pale blue in colour.

'Hood's breath,' Stormy said, 'we're sinking in goat's milk.'

'With a seasoning of brine,' Gesler added. He finished working on Baudin's hand. Truth joined them with a medic's kit.

'We won't have to go far,' Felisin said, her gaze off to starboard. Joining her, Kulp saw what she was looking at. A large ship sat motionless in the thick water less then fifty armspans away. It had twin banks of oars, hanging down listlessly. A single rudder was visible. There were three masts, the main and fore both rigged with tattered square sails, the mizzen mast with the shredded remnants of a lateen. There was no sign of life.

Baudin, his right hand now a blunt bandaged lump, joined them, the corporal a step behind. The one-eared man grunted. 'That's a Quon dromon. Pre-Imperial.'

'You know your ships,' Gesler said, giving the man a sharp glance.

Baudin shrugged. 'I worked in a prison gang, scuttling the republic's fleet in Quon Harbour. That was twenty years ago – Dassem had been using them to train his Marines—'

'I know,' Gesler said, his tone revealing first-hand knowledge.

'Young to be in a prison gang,' Stormy said from where he squatted amidst the water casks. 'You were what, ten? Fifteen?'

'Something like that,' Baudin said. 'And what got me there ain't your business, soldier.'

There was a long silence, then Gesler shook himself. 'You done, Stormy?'

'Aye, all rigged up.'

'All right, let's swim over before our lady makes her rush to the bottom. No gain if we end up all getting pulled down in her wake.'

'I ain't happy,' Stormy said as he eyed the dromon. 'That's right out of a tavern tale told at midnight. Could be Hood's Herald, could be cursed, plague-ridden—'

'Could be the only dry underfoot we'll find,' Gesler said. 'As for the rest, think of the tale you'll spin in the next tavern, Stormy. You'll have them

pissing their pants and rushing off to the nearest temple for a blessing. You could set it up to take a cut from the avatars.'

'Well, maybe you ain't got enough brains to be scared of anything...'

The corporal grinned. 'Let's get wet, everyone. I hear noblewomen pay in gold for a bath like the one we're about to take. That right, lass?'

Felisin did not answer.

Kulp shook his head. 'You're just happy to be alive,' he said to Gesler.

'Damn right.'

The water was cool, strangely slick and not easy to swim through. The *Ripath* settled behind them, its decks awash. Then the mast leaned to one side, pausing a moment before sweeping down to the water. Within seconds it had slipped beneath the surface.

Half an hour later they reached the dromon, gasping with exhaustion. Truth proved the only one capable of climbing up the steering oar. He clambered over the high sterncastle railing. A few moments later a thick-twined hemp ladder tumbled down to the others.

It was a struggle, but eventually everyone was aboard, Gesler and Stormy pulling up the food chest and water casks last.

From the sterncastle, Kulp looked down the length of the ship's deck. The abandonment had been a hasty thing. Coiled ropes and bundles of supplies wrapped in sealskin lay scattered about, along with discarded body armour, swords and belts. A thick, pale, greasy dust clung to everything.

The others joined him in silent study.

'Anybody see a name on the hull?' Gesler asked eventually. 'I looked, but...'

'Silanda,' Baudin said.

Stormy growled, 'Togg's teats, man, there wasn't no—'

'Don't need one to know this ship,' Baudin said. 'That cargo lying about down there, that's from Drift Avalii. *Silanda* was the only craft sanctioned to trade with the Tiste Andii. She was on her way to the island when the Emperor's forces overran Quon. She never returned.'

Silence followed his words.

It was broken by a soft laugh from Felisin. 'Baudin the thug. Did your prison gangs work in libraries as well?'

'Anybody else notice the waterline?' Gesler asked. 'This ship hasn't moved in years.' He shot one last, piercing glare at Baudin, then descended to the main deck. 'Might as well be a pile of rock knee-deep in guano,' he said, stopping at one of the sealskin bundles. He crouched down to unwrap it. A moment later he hissed a curse and lurched back. The bundle's flaps fell away, releasing its contents: a severed head. It rolled crazily across the deck, thumping up against the lip of the hold's hatchway.

Kulp pushed past a motionless Heboric, scrambled down to the main deck and approached the head. He raised his warren. Stopped.

'What do you see?' the ex-priest asked.

'Nothing I like,' the mage replied. He stepped closer, crouched. 'Tiste Andii.' He glanced over at Gesler. 'What I'm about to suggest is not pleasant, but...'

The corporal, his face white, nodded. 'Stormy,' he said as he turned to the next bundle. 'Give me a hand.'

'Doing what?'

'Counting heads.'

'Fener save me! Gesler—'

'You gotta be cold to spin a tale like this one. Takes practice. Get down here and get your hands dirty, soldier.'

There were dozens of bundles. Each contained a head, cleanly severed. Most were Tiste Andii, but some were human. Gesler began stacking them

into a grisly pyramid around the main mast. The corporal's recovery from his initial shock had been swift – clearly, the man had seen his share of horrors as a Marine of the Empire. Stormy was almost as quick in casting aside his revulsion, although a superstitious terror seemed to replace it – he worked frantically fast, and before too long every head had joined the ghastly pyramid.

Kulp turned his attention to the hatch leading down into the oar pit. A faint aura of sorcery rose from it, visible to his warren-touched senses as waves rippling the still air. He hesitated long before approaching it.

Apart from the mage and Gesler and Stormy, the others remained in the sterncastle, watching the proceedings with something like numb shock.

The corporal joined Kulp. 'Ready to check below?'

'Absolutely not.'

'Lead on, then,' Gesler said with a tight grin. He unsheathed his sword.

Kulp glanced down at it.

The corporal shrugged. 'Yeah, I know.'

Muttering under his breath, Kulp headed for the hatch. The lack of light below did nothing to hide what he saw. Sorcery lined everything, sickly yellow and faintly pulsing. Both hands on the railing, the mage descended the encrusted steps, Gesler close behind him.

'Can you see anything?' the corporal asked.

'Oh yes.'

'What's that smell?'

'If patience has a smell,' Kulp said, 'you're smelling it.' He cast a wave of light down the length of the centre walkway between the bench rows, spun it sideways and left it there.

'Well,' Gesler said, dry and rasping, 'there's a certain logic, isn't there?'

The oars were manned by headless corpses, three to a bench. Other sealskin bundles crowded every available space. Another headless figure sat behind a skin drum, both hands gripping strange, gourdlike batons. The figure was massively muscled. There was no evidence of decay on any of the bodies. White bone and red flesh glistened at the necks.

Neither man spoke for a long time, then Gesler cleared his throat, to little effect as he squeezed out gravel words. 'Did you say patience, Kulp?'

'Aye.'

'I ain't misheard, then.'

Kulp shook his head. 'Someone took the ship, beheaded everyone aboard .. . then put them to work.'

'In that order.'

'In that order.'

'How long ago?'

'Years. Decades. We're in a warren, Corporal. No telling how time works here.'

Gesler grunted. 'What say we check the captain's cabin? There might be a log.'

'And a "take to the oars" whistle.'

'Yeah. You know, if we hide that drum-beater, I could send Stormy down here to beat the time.'

'You've a wicked sense of humour, Gesler.'

'Aye. Thing is, Stormy tells the world's most boring sea tales. It'd do a favour to anyone he meets from now on to spice things up a little.'

'Don't tell me you're serious.'

The corporal sighed. 'No,' he said after a moment. 'I won't invite madness on anyone, Mage.'

They returned to the main deck. The others stared at them. Gesler shrugged. 'What you'd expect,' he said, 'if you was completely insane, that is.'

'Well,' Felisin replied, 'you're talking to the right crowd.'

Kulp strode towards the cabin hatch. The corporal sheathed his sword and then followed. The hatch descended two steps, then opened out into a galley. A large wooden table commanded the centre. Opposite them was a second hatch, leading to a narrow walkway with berths on either side. At the far end was the door to the captain's cabin.

No-one occupied the berths, but there was gear aplenty, all waiting for owners who no longer needed it.

The cabin door opened with a loud squeal.

Even with all they had seen thus far, the interior was a scene of horror. Four bodies were immediately visible, three of them twisted grotesquely in postures of sudden death. There was no evidence of decay, but no blood was visible. Whatever had killed them had crushed them thoroughly without once breaking skin. The exception sat in the captain's chair at the end of a map table, as if presiding over Hood's own stage. A spear jutted from his chest, and had been pushed through to the chair, then beyond. Blood glistened down the front of the figure's body, pooled in his lap. It had stopped flowing, yet looked still wet.

'Tiste Andii?' Gesler asked in a whisper.

'They have that look,' Kulp replied softly, 'but not quite.' He stepped into the cabin. 'Their skins are grey, not black. Nor do they look very ... refined.'

'The Tiste Andii of Drift Avalii were said to be pretty barbaric – not that anyone living has visited the isle.'

'None returned, in any case,' Kulp conceded. 'But these are wearing skins – barely cured. And look at their jewellery...' The four bodies were adorned in bone fetishes, claws, the canines of beasts, and polished seashells. There was none of the fine Tiste Andii craftwork that Kulp had had occasion to see in the past. Moreover, all four were brown-haired, the hair hanging

loose and uncombed, stringy with grease. Tiste Andii hair was either silver-white or midnight black.

'What in Hood's name are we seeing?' Gesler asked.

'The killers of the Quon sailors and the Tiste Andii, is my guess,' Kulp said. 'They then sailed into this warren, maybe by choice, maybe not. And ran into something nastier than them.'

'You think the rest of the crew escaped?'

Kulp shrugged. 'If you've got the sorcery to command headless corpses, who needs a bigger crew than the one we're looking at right here?'

'They still look like Tiste Andii,' the corporal said, peering closely at the man in the chair.

'We should get Heboric in here,' Kulp said. 'Maybe he's read something somewhere that'll bring light to all this.'

'Wait here,' Gesler said.

The ship was creaking now as the rest of the group began moving around on the main deck. Kulp listened to the corporal's footsteps recede up the walkway. The mage leaned both hands on the table, scanning the charts splayed out on its surface. There was a map there, showing a land he could not recognize: a ragged coastline of fjords studded with cursory sketches of pine trees. Inland was a faint whitewash, as of ice or snow. A course had been plotted, striking east from the jagged shoreline, then southward across a vast ocean. The Malazan Empire purported to have world maps, but they showed nothing like the land he saw here. The Empire's claim to dominance suddenly seemed pathetic.

Heboric stepped into the cabin behind him. Kulp did not turn from his study of the chart. 'Give them a close look,' the mage said.

The old man moved past Kulp, crouching down to frown at the captain's face. The high cheekbones and angular eye sockets looked Tiste Andii, as did the man's evident height. Heboric reached out tentatively—

'Wait,' Kulp growled. 'Be careful what you touch. And which arm you use.'

Heboric hissed in exasperation and dropped his arm. After a moment, he straightened. 'I can only think of one thing. Tiste Edur.'

'Who?'

'Gothos's Folly. There's mention of three Tiste peoples arriving from another realm. Of course the only one that's known to us is the Tiste Andii, and Gothos only names one of the other groups – Tiste Edur. Grey-skinned, not black. Children of the unwelcome union of Mother Dark with the Light.'

'Unwelcome?'

Heboric grimaced. 'The Tiste Andii considered it a degradation of pure Dark, and the source of all their subsequent ills. Anyway, *Gothos's Folly* is the only tome where you'll find mention of them. It also happens to be the oldest.'

'Gothos was Jaghut, correct?'

'Aye, and as sour-tempered a writer as I've ever had the displeasure of reading. Tell me, Kulp, what does your warren reveal?'

'Nothing.'

Heboric glanced over in surprise. 'Nothing at all?'

'No.'

'But they look to be in stasis – this blood's still wet.'

'I know.'

Heboric gestured at something around the captain's neck. 'There's your whistle, assuming we're going to make use of what's below decks.'

'Either that or we sit here and starve.' Kulp stepped closer to the captain's corpse. A long bone whistle hung from a leather thong, resting alongside the spear's shaft. 'I sense nothing from that bone tube either. It may not even work.'

Heboric shrugged. 'I'm going back up for what passes for fresh air. That spear's Barghast, by the way.'

'It's too damned big,' Kulp countered.

'I know, but that's what it looks like to me.'

'It's too big.'

Heboric made no reply, disappearing up the walkway. Kulp glared at the spear. *It's too big.* After a moment he reached out and gingerly removed the whistle from around the corpse's neck.

Emerging onto the main deck, the mage glanced again at the whistle. He grunted. It was alive with sorcery now. *The breath of Otataral's in that cabin. No wonder their sorcery couldn't defend them.* He looked around. Stormy had positioned himself at the prow, his ever-present crossbow strapped to his back. Baudin stood near him, cradling his bandaged hand. Felisin leaned against the railing near the main mast, arms crossed, appallingly cool with a pyramid of severed heads almost at her feet. Heboric was nowhere to be seen.

Gesler approached. 'Truth is heading up to the crow's nest,' he said. 'You got the whistle?'

Kulp tossed it over. 'Chosen a course yet?'

'Truth will see what he sees, then we'll decide.'

The mage craned his head, eyes narrowing on the lad as he lithely scrambled up the rigging. Five breaths later Truth clambered into the crow's nest and vanished from sight.

'Fener's hoof!' The curse drifted down, snared everyone's attention.

'Truth!'

'Three pegs to port! Storm sails!'

Gesler and Kulp rushed to the starboard railing. A smudge marred the formless horizon, flickering with lightning. Kulp hissed. 'That Hood-damned wizard's followed us!'

The corporal spun around. 'Stormy! Check what's left of these sails.' Without pause he put the whistle to his lips and blew. The sound was a chorus of voices, keening tonelessly. It chilled the air, the wail of souls twisted past torture, transforming pain into sound, fading with reluctance as Gesler pulled the whistle away.

Wood thumped on either side as oars were readied. Heboric stumbled from the hold hatch, his tattoos glowing like phosphor, his eyes wide as he swung to Gesler. 'You've got your crew, Corporal.'

'Awake,' Felisin muttered, stepping away from the main mast.

Kulp saw what she had seen. The severed heads had opened their eyes, swiveling to fix on Gesler as if driven by a single ghastly mechanism.

The corporal seemed to flinch, then he shook it off. 'Could've used one of these when I was a drill sergeant,' he said with a tight grin.

'Your drummer's ready down below,' Heboric said from where he stood peering down into the rowers' pit.

'Forget the sails,' Stormy said. 'Rotted through.'

'Man the steering oar,' Gesler ordered him. 'Three pegs to port – we can't do nothing but run.' He raised the whistle again and blew a rapid sequence. The drum started booming in time. The oars swung, blades flipping from horizontal to vertical, then dipped down into the sluggish water and pulled.

The ship groaned, crunching through the meniscus of crust that had clung to the hull. The *Silanda* lurched into motion and slowly eased round until the rapidly approaching storm cloud was directly astern. The oars pushed slimy water with relentless precision.

Gesler looped the whistle's thong around his neck. 'Wouldn't the old Emperor have loved this old lady, Kulp, eh?'

'Your excitement's nauseating, Corporal.'

The man barked a laugh.

The twin banks of oars lifted the *Silanda* into a ramming pace and stayed there. The cadence of the drum was a too swift heartbeat. It reverberated in Kulp's bones with a resonance that etched his nerves with pain. He did not need to descend into the pit to affirm his vision of that thick-muscled, headless corpse pounding the gourds against the skin, the relentless heave and pull of the rowers, the searing play of Hood-bound sorcery in the stifling atmosphere. His eyes went in search of Gesler, and found him standing at the sterncastle alongside Stormy. These were hard men, harder than he could fathom. They'd taken the grim black humour of the soldier further than he'd thought possible, cold as the sunless core of a glacier. *Bloody-minded confidence . . . or fatalism? Never knew Fener's bristles could be so black.*

The mad sorcerer's storm still gained on them, slower than before, yet an undeniable threat nonetheless. The mage strode to Heboric's side.

'Is this your god's warren?'

The old man scowled. 'Not my god. Not his warren. Hood knows where in the Abyss we are, and it seems there's no easy wakening from this nightmare.'

'You drove the god-touched hand into Stormy's wound.'

'Aye. Nothing but chance. Could have as easily been the other one.'

'What did you feel?'

Heboric shrugged. 'Something passing through. You'd guessed as much, didn't you?'

Kulp nodded.

'Was it Fener himself?'

'I don't know. I don't think so. I'm not an expert in matters religious. Doesn't seem to have affected Stormy ... apart from the healing. I didn't know Fener granted such boons.'

'He doesn't,' the ex-priest muttered, eyes clouding as he looked back at the two marines. 'Not without a price, anyway.'

Felisin sat apart from the others, her closest company the pyramid of staring heads. They didn't bother her much, since their attention remained on Gesler, on the man with the siren whistle of bone dangling on his chest. She thought back to the round in Unta, to the priest of flies. That had been the first time sorcery had been visited upon her. For all the stories of magic and wild wizards, of sorcerous conflagrations engulfing cities in wars at the very edges of the Empire, Felisin had never before witnessed such forces. It was never as common as the tales purported it to be. And the witnessing of magic left scars, a feeling of overwhelming vulnerability in the face of something beyond one's control. It made the world suddenly fey, deadly, frightening and bleak. That day in Unta had shifted her place in the world, or at least her sense of it. And she'd felt off-balance ever since.

But maybe it wasn't that. Not that at all. Maybe it was what I lived through on the march to the galleys, maybe it was that sea of faces, the storm of hate and mindless fury, of the freedom and hunger to deliver pain writ so plain in all those so very normal faces. Maybe it was the people that sent me reeling.

She looked over at the severed heads. The eyes did not blink. They were drying, crackling like egg white splashed on hot cobblestones. *Like mine. Too much has been seen. Far too much.* If demons rose out of the waters around them right now she would feel no shock, only a wonder that they had taken so long to appear *and could you be swift in ending it all, now? Please.*

Like a long-limbed ape, Truth came scrambling down from the rigging, landing lightly on the deck and pausing close to her as he brushed dusty rope fibres from his clothes. He had a couple of years on her, yet looked much younger to her eyes. U*npocked, smooth skin. The wisps of beard, all too clear eyes. No gallons of wine, no clouds of durhang smoke, no weighty bodies taking turns to push inside, into a place that had started out vulnerable* yet *was* soon *walled off from anything real, anything that mattered. I only gave them the illusion of getting inside me, a dead' end pocket. Can you grasp what I'm talking about, Truth?*

He noted her attention, gave her a shy smile. 'He's in the clouds,' he said, his voice hoarse with adolescence.

'Who is?'

'The sorcerer. Like an untethered kite, this way and that, trailing streamers of blood.'

'How poetic, Truth. Go back to being a marine.'

He reddened, turned away.

Baudin spoke behind her. 'The lad's too good for you and that's what makes you mean.'

'What would you know?' she sneered without turning.

'I can't scry you much, lass,' he admitted. 'But I can scry you some.'

'So you'd like to believe. Let me know when that hand starts rotting – I want to be there when it's cut off.'

The oars clacked in counterpoint to the thundering drum. The wind arrived like a gasping exhalation, and the sorcerer's storm was upon them.

Something ragged across his brow awoke Fiddler. He opened his eyes to a mass of bristle ends that suddenly lifted clear to reveal a wizened black face peering critically down. The face concluded its examination with an expression of distaste.

'Spiders in your beard ... or worse. Can't see them, but I know they're there.'

The sapper drew a deep breath and winced at the throbbing protest from his broken ribs. 'Get away from me!' he growled. Stinging pain wrapped his thighs, reminders of the gouging claws that had raked them. His left ankle was heavily bandaged – the numbness from his foot was worrying.

'Can't,' the old man replied. 'No escape is possible. Bargains were sealed, arrangements made. The Deck speaks plain in this. A life given for a life

taken, and more besides.'

'You're Dal Honese,' Fiddler said. 'Where am I?'

The face split into a wide grin. 'In Shadow. Hee hee.'

A new voice spoke from behind the strange old man. 'He wakens and you torment him, High Priest. Move aside, the soldier needs air, not airs.'

'It's a matter of justice,' the High Priest retorted, though he pulled back. 'Your tempered companion kneels before that altar, does he not? These details are vital to understanding.' He took another step back as the massive form of the other speaker moved into view.

'Ah,' Fiddler sighed. 'The Trell. Memory returns. And your companion ... the Jhag?'

'He entertains your companions,' the Trell said. 'Feebly, I admit. For all his years, Icarium has never mastered the social grace necessary to put others at ease.'

'Icarium, the Jhag by that name. The maker of machines, the chaser of time—'

The Trell showed his canines in a wide, wry smile. 'Aye, lord of the sand grains – though that poetic allusion's lost on most and awkward besides.'

'Mappo.'

'Aye again. And your friends name you Fiddler, relieving you of the guise of a Gral horsewarrior.'

'Hardly matters that I awoke out of character, then,' Fiddler said.

'There's no punishment awaiting the lapse, soldier. Thirsty? Hungry?'

'Good, yes and yes. But first, where are we?'

'In a temple carved into a cliff. Out of the Whirlwind. Guests of a High Priest of Shadow – whom you've met. Iskaral Pust.'

'Pust?'

'Even so.'

The Dal Honese High Priest pushed into view again, scowling. 'You mock my name, soldier?'

'Not I, High Priest.'

The old man grunted, adjusted his grip on the broom, then scampered from the room.

Fiddler sat up gingerly, moving like an ancient. He was tempted to ask Mappo for an assessment of the damage, especially his ankle, but decided to hold off hearing the likely bad news a while longer. 'What's that man's story?'

'I doubt even he knows.'

'I awoke when he was sweeping my head.'

'Not surprising.'

There was an ease to the Trell's presence that relaxed Fiddler. Until he recalled the warrior's name. Mappo, *a name ever chained to another's. And enough rumours to fill a tome. If any were true . . .* 'Icarium scared off the D'ivers.'

'His reputation carries weight.'

'Is it earned, Mappo?' Even as he asked, Fiddler knew he should have bitten back the question.

The Trell winced, withdrew slightly. 'I shall get you food and drink, then.'

Mappo left the small room, moving silently despite his considerable bulk, the combination raising an echo that brought Kalam to mind. *Did you outrun the storm, old friend?*

Iskaral Pust eased back into the chamber. 'Why are you here?' he whispered. 'Do you know why? You don't, but I'll tell you. You and no-one else.' He leaned close, plucking at his spiral wisps of hair with both hands. 'Tremorlor!'

Laughing at Fiddler's expression, he spun about in wild, capering steps before settling once more in front of the sapper, their faces inches apart. 'The rumour of a path, a way home. A small wriggling worm of a rumour, even less, a grub, smaller than a nail clipping, the compacted and knotted mess wrapped around something that might be a truth. Or not. Hee hee!'

Fiddler had had enough. Grimacing through the pain, he grabbed the man's collar and shook. Spittle struck his face, the High Priest's eyes rolled about like marbles in a cup.

'What, again?' Iskaral Pust managed to say.

Fiddler pushed him away.

The old man staggered, righted himself and made a show of reassembling his dignity. 'A concurrence of reactions. Too long out of social engagements and the like. Must examine my manners, and more, my personality.' He cocked his head. 'Honest. Forthright. Amusing. Gentle and impressive integrity. Well! Where's the problem, then? Soldiers are crude. Callow and thick. Distempered. Do you know the Chain of Dogs?'

Fiddler started, blinked as if shaken from a trance. 'What?'

'It's begun, though not yet known. Anabar Thy'lend. Chain of Dogs in the Malazan tongue. Soldiers have no imaginations, meaning they're capable of vast surprises. There are some things even the Whirlwind cannot sweep aside.'

Mappo Trell returned, bearing a tray. 'Harassing our guest again, Iskaral Pust?'

'Shadow-borne prophecies,' the High Priest muttered, eyeing Fiddler with cool appraisal. 'The gutter under the flood, raising ripples on the plunging surface. A river of blood, the flow of words from a hidden heart. All things sundered. Spiders in every crook and corner.' He whirled about, stamped out of the room.

Mappo stared after him.

'Pay him no heed, right?'

The Trell swung around, his heavy brows lifting. 'Hood, no, pay that man every heed, Fiddler.'

'I was afraid you'd say that. He mentioned Tremorlor. He knows.'

'He knows what even your companions don't,' Mappo said, carrying the tray to the sapper. 'You seek the fabled Azath House, out in the desert. Somewhere.'

Aye, and the gate Quick Ben swears it holds . . . 'And you?' Fiddler asked. 'What has brought you to Raraku?'

'I follow Icarium,' the Trell replied. 'A search without end.'

'And you've devoted your life to helping him in his search?'

'No,' Mappo sighed, then whispered without meeting Fiddler's gaze, 'I seek to keep it endless. Here, break your fast. You've been unconscious for two days. Your friends are restless with questions, eager to speak with you.'

'I suppose I've no choice – I'd better answer those questions.'

'Aye, and once you've mended some, we can begin our journey ...' He smiled cautiously. 'To find Tremorlor.'

Fiddler frowned. 'Mended, you said. My ankle was crushed – I can barely feel a thing beyond my knee. Seems likely you'll have to cut that foot off.'

'I've some experience in healing,' Mappo said. 'This temple once specialized in such alchemies, and the nuns left much behind. And, oddly enough, Iskaral Pust seems to show some talent as well, though one has to keep an eye on him. His wits scatter sometimes and he confuses elixirs with poisons.'

'He's an avatar of Shadowthrone,' the sapper said, eyes narrowing. 'Or the Rope, Cotillion, the Patron of Assassins – there's little difference between the two.'

The Trell shrugged. 'The art of assassination requires a complementary knowledge of healing. Two sides to the same alchemical coin. In any case, he actually did surgery on your ankle – fear not, I observed. And, I admit,

learned much. Essentially, the High Priest rebuilt your ankle. Using an unguent, he sealed the fragments – I've never before seen the like. Thus, you will heal, and quickly.'

'A pair of hands devoted to Shadow poked around under my skin? Hood's breath!'

'It was that or lose your foot. You had a punctured lung as well – beyond my skills, that, but the High Priest contrived to drain your lung of blood, then made you breathe a healing vapour. You owe Iskaral Pust your life.'

'Precisely my point,' Fiddler muttered.

There were voices outside, then Apsalar appeared in the doorway, Crokus behind her. The two days out of the desiccating storm had done much to revive both of them. They entered, Crokus rushing past to crouch beside Fiddler's bed.

'We have to get out of here!' he hissed.

The sapper glanced at Mappo, noted his wry smile as he slowly backed away. 'Calm down, lad. What is the problem?'

'The High Priest – he's of the Shadow Cult, Fiddler. Don't you see – Apsalar ...'

Something cold slithered along the sapper's bones. 'Oh, damn,' he whispered. 'I see your point.' He looked up as the young woman stepped to the foot of the bed, and spoke in a low tone. 'Your mind still your own, lass?'

'The little man treats me well,' she said, shrugging.

'Well?' Crokus spluttered. 'Like the prodigal returned, you mean! What's to stop Cotillion from possessing you all over again?'

'You need only ask his servant,' a new voice said from the doorway. Icarium stood leaning, arms crossed, against the frame. His slitted grey eyes were fixed on the room's far corner.

From the gloom of the shadows there a figure took shape. Iskaral Pust, seated on a strangely wrought chair, squirmed and flung a glare at the Jhag. 'I was to remain unseen, fool! What gift shadows when you so clearly divine what they hide? Pah! I am undone!'

Icarium's thin lips quirked slightly. 'Why not give them answer, Iskaral Pust? Put them at ease.'

'Put them at ease?' The High Priest seemed to find the words awkward. 'What value that? I must think. At ease. Relaxed. Unmindful of restraint. Careless. Yes, of course! Excellent idea.' He paused, swung his head to Fiddler.

The sapper watched a smile slide aboard the wizened man's face, oiled and smooth and pathetically insincere.

'Everything's fine, my friends,' he purred. 'Be calm. Cotillion is done with possessing the lass. The bane of Anomander Rake's threat remains. Who wants that crude conveyor of uncivilized mayhem crashing through the temple door? Not Shadowthrone. Not the Patron of Assassins. She is protected still. Besides which, Cotillion finds no further value in using her, and indeed the residue of his talents still within her gives cause for secret concern—' His face twisted on itself. 'No, better keep that thought unspoken!' He smiled again. 'Cultured conversation has been rediscovered and used with guile and grace. Look upon them, Iskaral Pust, they are won over one and all.'

There was a long silence.

Mappo cleared his throat. 'The High Priest rarely has company,' he said.

Fiddler sighed, suddenly exhausted. He leaned back, closed his eyes. 'My horse? Did it live?'

'Yes,' Crokus said. 'It's been taken care of, as have the others – those that Mappo had time to tend to, that is. And there's a servant here, somewhere. We haven't seen him, but he does good work.'

Apsalar spoke. 'Fiddler, tell us about Tremorlor.'

A new tension filled the air. The sapper sensed it even as sleep pulled at him, alluring with its promise of temporary escape. After a moment he pushed it away with another sigh and opened his eyes. 'Quick Ben's knowledge of the Holy Desert is, uh, vast. When we last rode the Holy Desert – as we rode out, in fact – he spoke of the Vanished Roads. Like the one we found, an ancient road that sleeps beneath the sands and appears only occasionally – if the winds are right, that is. Well, one of those roads leads to Tremorlor—'

Crokus cut in, 'Which is?'

'A House of the Azath.'

'Like the one that arose in Darujhistan?'

'Aye. Such buildings exist – or are rumoured to exist – on virtually every continent. No-one knows their purpose, though it does seem that they are a lodestone to power. There's the old story that the Emperor and Dancer ...' *Oh, Hood, Kellanved and Dancer, Ammanas and Cotillion, the possible linkage with Shadow . . . this temple . . .* Fiddler shot Iskaral Pust a sharp look. The High Priest sported an avid grin, his eyes glittering. 'Uh, the legend goes that Kellanved and Dancer once occupied one such House, in Malaz City—'

'Deadhouse,' Icarium said from the doorway. 'The legend is true.'

'Aye,' Fiddler muttered, then shook himself. 'Well enough. In any case, it's Quick Ben's belief that such Houses are all linked to one another, via gates of some sort. And that travel between them is possible – virtually instantaneous travel—'

'Excuse me,' Icarium said, stepping into the room with an air of sudden attentiveness. 'I have not heard the name Quick Ben. Who is this man purporting to possess such arcane knowledge of the Azath?'

The sapper fidgeted under the Jhag's intent gaze, then scowled at himself and straightened slightly. 'A squad mage,' he answered, making it clear he did not intend to elaborate.

Icarium's eyes went oddly heavy. 'You put much weight on a squad mage's opinions.'

'Aye, I do.'

Crokus spoke. 'You mean to find Tremorlor to use the gate to take us to Malaz City. To this Deadhouse. Which would leave us—'

'A half-day's sail from the Itko Kanese coast,' Fiddler said, meeting Apsalar's eyes. 'And home to your father.'

'Father?' Mappo asked, frowning. 'You now confuse me.'

'We're delivering Apsalar back home,' Crokus explained. 'To her family. She was possessed by Cotillion, stolen away from her father, her life—'

'Her life as what?' Mappo asked.

'A fishergirl.'

The Trell fell silent, but Fiddler thought he knew Mappo's unspoken thoughts. *After what she's been through, she's going to settle for a life dragging nets?*

Apsalar herself said nothing.

'A life given for a life taken!' Iskaral Pust shouted, leaping from his chair and spinning in place, both hands clenched in his tufts of hair. 'Such patience is enough to drive one mad! But not me! Anchored to the currents of weathered stone, the trickling away of sand under the sun's glare! Time stretched, stretching, immortal players in a timeless game. There is poetry in the pull of elements, you know. The Jhag understands. The Jhag seeks the secrets – he is stone and the stone forgets, the stone is ever now, and in this lies the truth of the Azath – but wait! I've rambled on with such hidden thoughts and heard nothing of what is being said!' He fell abruptly silent and subsided back into the chair.

Icarium's study of the High Priest could well have been something carved from charged stone. Fiddler's attention was being pulled every which way. Thoughts of sleep had long since vanished. 'I'm not certain of these details,' he said slowly, drawing everyone's attention, 'but I have the distinct feeling

of being a marionette joining a vast and intricate dance. What's the pattern? Who clutches the strings?'

All eyes swung to Iskaral Pust. The High Priest retained his fixed attentiveness a moment longer, then blinked. 'A question asked of modest me? Excuses and apologies admittedly insincere. Vast and intricate mind wanders on occasion. Your query?' He ducked his head, smiled into the shadows. 'Are they deceived? Subtle truths, vague hints, a chance choice of words in unmindful echo? They know not. Bask in their awe with all wide-eyed innocence, oh, this is exquisite!'

'You've answered us eloquently,' Mappo said to the High Priest.

'I have? This is unwell. Rather, how kind of me. You're welcome. I shall command Servant to ready your party, then. A journey to fabled Tremorlor, where all truths shall converge with the clarity of unsheathed blades and unveiled fangs, where Icarium shall find his lost past, the once possessed fisher-girl shall find what she does not yet know she seeks, where the lad shall find the price of becoming a man, or perhaps not, where the hapless Trell shall do whatever he must, and where a weary sapper shall at least receive his Emperor's blessing, oh yes. Unless, of course,' he added, one finger to his lips, 'Tremorlor is naught but a myth and these quests nothing but hollow artifice.'

The High Priest – finger still against his lips – settled back in the strange chair. Shadows closed around him. A moment later he and the chair vanished.

Fiddler found himself starting out of a vague, floating trance. He shook his head, rubbed his face and glanced at the others, only to see they were reacting in similar ways – as if they had one and all been pulled into a subtle, seductive sorcery. Fiddler released a shaky breath. 'Can there be magic in mere words?' he asked to no-one in particular.

Icarium answered. 'Magic powerful enough to drive gods to their knees, soldier.'

'We have to get out of here,' Crokus muttered.

This time everyone nodded agreement.

CHAPTER NINE

> The Malazan engineers are a unique breed. Cantankerous, foul-mouthed, derisive of authority, secretive and thick-headed. They are the heartstone of the Malazan Army ...
>
> *The Imperial Military*
> Senjalle

As he descended into the Orbala Odhan, Kalam came upon the first signs of the uprising. A train of Malazan refugees had been ambushed while travelling along a dried stream bed. The attackers had come from the high grass lining both banks, first with arrow fire, then a rush to close with the hapless Malazans.

Three wagons had been set aflame. The assassin sat motionless on his horse, studying the smoke-hazed heaps of charred wood, ash and bone. A small bundle of child's clothing was all that remained of the victims' possessions, a small knot of colour ten paces from the smouldering remains of wagons.

After one last glance around in search of Apt – the demon was nowhere to be seen, though he knew it was close – Kalam dismounted. Tracks revealed that the train's livestock had been led away by the ambushers. The only bodies were those that had been burned in the wagons. His search revealed that there had been survivors, a small group abandoning the scene and fleeing south, out across the Odhan. It did not appear that they had been pursued, but Kalam well knew that there was little chance of salvation out on the plain. The town of Orbal was five, perhaps six days away on foot, and it was likely that it was in rebel hands in any case, since the Malazan detachment there had always been undermanned.

He wondered where the refugees had come from. There was little to be found for leagues in any direction.

Making a sound on the sand like the beat of a skin drum, Apt ambled into view from downstream. The beast's wounds had healed, more or less, leaving puckered scars on its black hide. Five days had passed since the D'ivers attack. There had been no sign that the shapeshifter still pursued them, and Kalam hoped that it had taken enough damage to be discouraged from persisting in the hunt.

Nevertheless, they were being trailed by ... *someone.* The assassin felt it in his bones. He was tempted to lay an ambush of his own, but he was one man alone and his pursuers might be many. Moreover, he was uncertain whether Apt would assist his efforts – he suspected not. His only advantage was the swiftness of his travel. He'd found his horse after the battle without much trouble, and the animal seemed impervious to the rigours of the journey. He'd begun to suspect that an issue of pride had arisen between the stallion and the demon – his mount's bolting from the fight must have stung, and it was as if the horse was determined to recover whatever delusions of dominance he possessed.

Kalam climbed back into the saddle. Apt had found the trail left by the fleeing survivors and was sniffing the air, swinging its long, blunt head from side to side.

'Not our problem,' Kalam told it, loosening the lone surviving long-knife at his belt. 'We've enough troubles of our own, Apt.' He nudged his mount and set off in a direction that would take him well around the trail.

In deepening dusk he rode across the plain. Despite its size, the demon seemed to vanish within the gloom. A *demon born in the Shadow Realm, I shouldn't be surprised.*

The grassland dipped ahead – another ancient river track. As he approached, figures rose from cover along the nearest bank. Cursing under his breath, Kalam slowed his mount, raising both hands, palms forward.

'Mekral, Obarii,' Kalam said. 'I ride the Whirlwind!'

'Closer then,' a voice replied.

Hands still raised, Kalam guided his horse forward with his heels and knees.

'Mekral,' the same voice acknowledged. A man stepped clear of the high grasses, a tulwar in one hand. 'Come join us in our feast, rider. You have news of the north?'

Relaxing, Kalam dismounted. 'Months old, Obarii. I've not spoken aloud in weeks – what stories can you tell me?'

The spokesman was simply another bandit who now marauded behind the rebellion's noble mask. He showed the assassin a gap-toothed smile. 'Vengeance against the Mezla, Mekral. Sweet as spring water, such vengeance.'

'The Whirlwind has seen no defeat, then? Have the Mezla armies done nothing?'

Leading his horse, Kalam strode with the raiders down into the encampment. It had been carelessly laid out, revealing a sloppy mind in command. A large pile of wood was about to be set alight, promising a cooking fire that would be visible across half the Odhan. A small herd of oxen had been paddocked inside a makeshift kraal just downwind of the camp.

'The Mezla armies have done nothing but die,' the leader said, grinning. 'We have heard that but one remains, far to the southeast. Led by a Wickan with a heart of black, bloodless stone.'

Kalam grunted. A man passed him a wineskin and, nodding his thanks, he drank deep. Saltoan, booty from the Mezla – *probably the wagons I saw earlier. Same for the oxen.* 'Southeast? One of the coastal cities?'

'Aye, Hissar. But Hissar is now in Kamist Reloe's hands. As are all the cities but Aren, and Aren has the Jhistal within. The Wickan flees overland, chained with refugees by the thousand – they beg his protection even as they lap his blood.'

'Not black-hearted enough, then,' Kalam muttered.

'True. He should leave them to Reloe's armies, but he fears the wrath of the coddled fools commanding in Aren, not that they'll breathe much longer.'

'What is this Wickan's name?'

'Coltaine. It's said he is winged like a crow, and finds much to laugh about amidst slaughter. A long, slow death awaits him, this much Kamist Reloe has promised.'

'May the Whirlwind reap every reward it's earned,' the assassin said, drinking again.

'A beautiful horse you have, Mekral.'

'And loyal. Beware the stranger seeking to ride him.' Kalam hoped the warning was not too subtle for the man.

The bandit leader shrugged. 'All things can be tamed.'

The assassin sighed, set down the wineskin. 'Are you betrayers of the Whirlwind?' he asked.

All motion around him ceased. Off to his left the fire's bone-dry wood crackled in a rising flame.

The leader spread his hands, an offended expression on his face. 'A simple compliment, Mekral! How have we earned such suspicion? We are not thieves or murderers, friend. We are believers! Your fine horse is yours, of course, though I have gold-'

'Not for sale, Obarii.'

'You have not heard my offer!'

'All Seven Holy Treasures will not sway me,' Kalam growled.

'Then no more shall be said of such matters.' The man retrieved the wineskin and offered it to Kalam.

He accepted but did no more than wet his lips.

'These are sad times,' the bandit leader continued, 'when trust is a rare thing among fellow soldiers. We all ride in Sha'ik's name, after all. We share a single, hated enemy. Nights such as these, granted peace under the stars amidst this holy war, are cause for celebration and brotherhood, friend.'

'Your words have captured the beauty of our crusade,' Kalam said. *Words can so easily glide over mayhem and terror and horror, it's a wonder trust exists at all.*

'You will now give me your horse and that fine weapon at your belt.'

The assassin's laugh was a soft rumble. 'I count seven of you, four before me, three hovering behind.' He paused, smiling as he met the bandit leader's fire-lit eyes. 'It will be a close thing, but I will be certain to kill you first, *friend.'*

The man hesitated, then answered with his own smile. 'You've no sense of humour. Perhaps it is due to travelling so long without company that you have forgotten the games soldiers play. Have you eaten? We came upon a party of Mezla only this morning, and they were all too generous with their food and possessions. We shall visit them again, at dawn. There are women among them.'

Kalam scowled. 'And this is your war against the Mezla? You are armed, you are mounted – why have you not joined the armies of the Apocalypse? Kamist Reloe needs warriors like you. I ride south to join in the siege of Aren, which must surely come.'

'As do we – to walk through Aren's yawning gates!' the man replied fervently. 'And more, we bring livestock with us, to help feed our brothers in the army! Do you suggest we ignore the rich Mezla we come upon?'

'The Odhan will kill them without our help,' the assassin said. 'You have their oxen.' *Aren's yawning gates . . . the Jhistal within. What does that mean? Jhistal, not a familiar word, not Seven Cities. Falari?*

The man's expression had cooled in response to Kalam's words. 'We attack them at dawn. Do you ride with us, Mekral?'

'They are south of here?'

'They are. Less than an hour's ride.'

'Then it is the direction I am already travelling, so I shall join you.'

'Excellent!'

'But there is nothing holy in rape,' Kalam growled.

'No, not holy.' The man grinned. 'But just.'

They rode in the night, beneath a vast scatter of stars. One of the bandits had stayed behind with the oxen and other booty, leaving Kalam riding with a party of six. All carried short recurved bows, though their supply of arrows was low – not a single quiver held more than three, and all with ragged fletching. The weapons would be effective at close range only.

Bordu, the bandit leader, told the assassin that the Malazan refugees consisted of one man – a Malazan soldier – two women and two young boys. He was certain that the soldier had been wounded in the first ambush. Bordu did not expect much of a fight. They would take down the men first. 'Then we can play with the women and boys – perhaps you will change your mind, Mekral.'

Kalam's only response was a grunt. He knew men such as these. Their courage held so long as they outnumbered their victims, the hollow glory they thirsted for came with overpowering and terrorizing the helpless. Such creatures were common in the world, and a land locked in war left them to run free, the brutal truths behind every just cause. They were given a name in the Ehrlii tongue: e'ptarh le'gebran, the vultures of violence.

The withered skin of the prairie broke up ahead. Hump-shouldered knobs of granite were visible above the grasses, studding the slopes of a series of low hills. Faint firelight blushed the air behind one such large outcropping. Kalam shook his head. Far too careless in a hostile land – the soldier with them should have known better.

Bordu raised a hand, slowing them to a halt about fifty paces from the monolithic outcrop. 'Keep your eyes from the hearth,' he whispered to the

others. 'Let those fools be cursed with blindness, not us. Now, spread out. The Mekral and I will ride around to the other side. Give us fifty breaths, then attack.'

Kalam's eyes narrowed on the bandit leader. Coming at the camp from the opposite side, he would run an obvious risk of taking an arrow or three from these attackers in the melee. More *soldier's humour,* I *take it.* But he said nothing, pulling away when Bordu did and riding side by side on a route that would circumvent the refugees' camp.

'Your men are skilled with their bows?' the assassin asked a few minutes later.

'Like vipers, Mekral.'

'With about the same range,' Kalam muttered.

'They'll not miss.'

'No doubt.'

'You are afraid, Mekral? You, such a large, dangerous-looking man. A warrior, without doubt. I am surprised.'

'I've a bigger surprise,' Kalam said, reaching over and sliding a blade across Bordu's throat.

Blood sprayed. Gurgling, the bandit leader reeled back in his saddle, his head flopping horribly.

The assassin sheathed his knife. He rode closer in time to prop the man back up in his saddle and hold him balanced there, one hand to Bordu's back. 'Ride with me a while longer,' Kalam said, 'and may the Seven Holies flay your treacherous soul.' As *they* will *mine, when the time comes.*

The glimmering firelight lay ahead. Distant shouts announced the bandits' charge. Horse hooves thumped the hard ground. Kalam tapped his mount into a canter. Bordu's horse matched the pace, the bandit leader's body weaving, his head now lolling almost on its side, ear against one shoulder.

They reached the hill's slope, which was gentler on this side and mostly unobstructed. The attackers were visible now, riding into the shell of firelight, arrows zinging to thud into the blanket-wrapped figures around the hearth.

From the sound those arrows made Kalam knew instantly that there were no bodies beneath those blankets. The soldier had proved his worth, had laid a trap. The assassin grinned. He pushed Bordu down over the saddlehorn and gave the bandit leader's horse a slap on the rump. It charged into the light.

The assassin quickly checked his own mount's canter, slipped to the ground still in the darkness beyond the firelight, and padded forward noiselessly.

The crisp snap of a crossbow sounded. One of the bandits pitched back in his saddle and tumbled to the ground. The four others had pulled up, clearly confused. Something like a small bag flew into the hearth, landing with a spray of sparks. A moment later the night was lit up in a cascading flame, and the four bandits were clearly outlined. The crossbow loosed again. A bandit shrieked, arching to reach for a quarrel embedded in his back. A moment later he groaned, sagging as his horse stepped in a confused circle.

Kalam had escaped exposure in the burst of light, but his night vision was gone. Swearing under his breath, he edged forward, long-knife in his right hand, double-edged dagger in his left.

He heard another rider coming in hard from one side. Both bandits wheeled their mounts to meet the charge. The horse appeared, slowing from what had been a bolt. There was no-one in the saddle.

The flare-up from the hearth was ebbing.

His nerves suddenly tingling, Kalam stopped and crouched down. He watched as the riderless horse trotted aimlessly to the right of the bandits, the animal moving closer to come alongside one of the attackers. In a fluid, graceful motion, the rider swung up into view – a woman, who had been crouching down out of sight over one stirrup – twisting to chop down at the

nearest bandit with a butcher's cleaver. The huge blade connected with the man's neck and cut through to lodge in his vertebra.

Then the woman had both feet on the saddle. Even as the bandit toppled she stepped onto his horse, taking the lance from the saddle holster and jabbing it like a spear at the second bandit.

Cursing, the man reacted with a warrior's training. Instead of leaning back in what would have been a hopeless effort to avoid the lancehead flashing at his chest, he drove both heels into his horse, twisting to let the lance slip past. His mount rammed the other horse, chest to flank. With a startled yelp the woman lost her balance and fell heavily to the ground.

The bandit leapt from the saddle, unsheathing his tulwar.

Kalam's dagger took him in the throat three paces from the dazed woman. Spitting in fury, hands clutching his neck, the bandit fell to his knees. Kalam approached to deliver a killing thrust.

'Stand still,' a voice snapped behind him. 'Got a quarrel trained on you. Drop that lizard-sticker. Now!'

Shrugging, the assassin let the weapon fall from his hand. 'I'm Second Army,' he said. 'Onearm's Host—'

'Are fifteen hundred leagues away.'

The woman had regained the breath that had been driven from her lungs. She rose to her hands and knees, long black hair hanging down over her face.

The last bandit finished dying with a faint, wet gurgle.

'You're Seven Cities,' the voice behind Kalam said.

'Aye, yet a soldier of the Empire. Listen, work it out. I rode up from the other side, with the bandits' leader. He was dead before his horse carried him into your camp.'

'So why does a soldier wear a telaba and no colours and ride alone? Desertion, and that's a death sentence.'

Kalam hissed in exasperation. 'And clearly you chose to protect your family instead of whatever company you're attached to. By Imperial Military Law *that* counts as desertion, soldier.' As he spoke the Malazan stepped around, his crossbow still trained on the assassin.

Kalam saw a man half dead on his feet. Short and wide, he wore the tattered remnants of an Outpost detachment uniform, light-grey leather jerkin, dark-grey surcoat. His face was covered in a network of scratches, as were his hands and forearms. A deep wound marred his bristly chin, and the helm shadowing his eyes was dented. The clasp of his surcoat ranked him a captain.

The assassin's eyes widened upon seeing that. 'Though a captain deserting is a rare thing ...'

'He didn't desert,' the woman said, now fully recovered and sorting through the weapons of the dead bandits. She found a lightweight tulwar and tested its balance with a few swings. In the firelight Kalam could see she was attractive, medium-boned, her hair streaked with iron. Her eyes were a startling light grey. She collected a belted sword-hoop and strapped it on.

'We rode out of Orbal,' the captain said, pain evident in his voice. 'A whole company escorting out refugees – our families. Ran smack into a Hood-damned army on the march south.'

'We're all that's left,' the woman said, turning to gesture into the darkness. Another woman – a younger, thinner version of the other one – and two children stepped cautiously into the light, then rushed to the captain's side.

The man continued to aim an unsteady crossbow at Kalam. 'Selv, my wife,' he said, gesturing to the woman now at his side. 'Our children, there. And Selv's sister Minala. That's us. Now, let's hear your story.'

'Corporal Kalam, Ninth Squad ... Bridgeburners. Now you know why I'm out of uniform, sir.'

The man grinned. 'You've been outlawed. So why aren't you marching with Dujek? Unless you've returned to your homeland to join the

Whirlwind.'

'Is that your horse?' Minala asked.

The assassin turned to see his mount step casually into the camp. 'Aye.'

'You know your horses,' she said.

'It cost me a virgin's ransom. I figure if something's expensive it's probably good, and that's how much I know horses.'

'You still haven't explained why you're here,' the captain muttered, but Kalam could see he was relaxing his guard.

'Smelled the uprising in the wind,' the assassin said. 'The Empire brought peace to Seven Cities. Sha'ik wants a return to the old days – tyrants, border wars and slaughter. I ride for Aren. That's where the punitive force will land – and if I'm lucky I can slip myself in, maybe as a guide.'

'You'll ride with us, then, Corporal,' the captain said. 'If you're truly a Bridgeburner you'll know how to soldier, and if that's what you show me on the way to Aren, I'll see you rejoin the Imperial ranks without fuss.'

Kalam nodded. 'Can I retrieve my weapons now, Captain?'

'Go ahead.'

The assassin crouched down, reached for his long-knife, paused. 'Oh, one thing, Captain ...'

The man had sagged against his wife. He swung bleary eyes on Kalam. 'What?'

'Better my name should change ... I mean, officially. I wouldn't welcome the gallows if I'm marked in Aren. Granted, Kalam is common enough, but there's always the chance I'd be recognized—'

'You're *that* Kalam? You said the Ninth, didn't you? Hood's breath!' If the captain had planned to say more it was lost as the man's knees buckled. With a soft whimper his wife eased him down to the ground, looked up at her sister with frightened eyes, then over at Kalam.

'Relax, lass,' the assassin said, straightening. He grinned. 'I'm back in the army now.'

The two boys, one about seven and the other four, moved with exaggerated caution towards the unconscious man and his wife. She saw them and opened her arms. They rushed to her embrace.

'He was trampled,' Minala said. 'One of the bandits dragged him behind his horse. Sixty paces before he cut himself free.'

Women who lived with garrisons were either harlots or wives – there was little doubt which one Minala had been. 'Your husband was in the company as well?'

'He commanded it, but he's dead.'

It could have been a statement about the weather for all the emotion expressed, and Kalam sensed the rigid control that held the woman. 'And the captain's your brother-in-law?'

'His name is Keneb. You've met my sister Selv. The older boy is Kesen, the younger Vaneb.'

'You're from Quon?'

'Long ago.'

Not *the talkative type.* The assassin glanced over at Keneb. 'Will he live?'

'I don't know. He has dizzy spells. Blackouts.'

'Sagging face, slurred words?'

'No.'

Kalam went to his horse and gathered up the reins.

'Where are you going?' Minala demanded.

'There's one bandit standing guard over food, water and horses. We need all three.'

'Then we all go.'

Kalam started to argue but Minala raised a hand. 'Think, Corporal. We have the bandits' horses. We can ride, all of us. The boys sat in saddles before they could walk. And who guards us when you're gone? What happens if you get wounded fighting that last bandit?' She spun to her sister. 'We'll get Keneb over a saddle, Selv. Agreed?'

She nodded.

The assassin sighed. 'But leave the guard to me.'

'We will. It seems you've a reputation, by Keneb's reaction.'

'Fame, or notoriety?'

'I expect he'll say more when he comes around.'

I hope not. The less they know about me the better.

The sun was still an hour from rising when Kalam raised a hand to bring the party to a halt. 'That old river bed,' he hissed, gesturing a thousand paces ahead. 'All of you wait here. I won't be long.'

Kalam removed the best of the bandits' recurved bows from its saddle sheath and selected two of the least tattered arrows. 'Load that crossbow,' he said to Minala. 'In case something goes wrong.'

'How will I know?'

The assassin shrugged. 'In your gut.' He glanced at Keneb. The captain was laid over a saddle, still unconscious. That wasn't good. Head injuries were always unpredictable.

'He's still breathing,' Minala said quietly.

Kalam grunted, then set off at a dogtrot across the plain.

He saw the glow of the campfire well before he reached the high grass lining the bank. Still careless. A good sign. The voices he could hear weren't. He dropped down and slid forward through the dew-wet grass on his stomach.

Another party of raiders had arrived. Bearing gifts. Kalam saw the motionless, sprawled bodies of five women flung down around the camp. All had been raped, then murdered. In addition to Bordu's guard there were seven others, all sitting around the fire. All well armed and armoured in boiled leather.

Bordu's guard was speaking a dozen words for every breath. '—won't tire the horses. So the prisoners will walk. Two women. Two boys. Like I said. Bordu plans these things. And a horse worthy of a prince. You'll see soon enough—'

'Bordu will gift the horse,' one of the newcomers growled. Not a question.

'Of course he will. And a boy too. Bordu is a generous commander, sir. Very generous ...'

Sir. True soldiers of the Whirlwind, then.

Kalam edged back, then hesitated. A moment later, his eyes coming to rest again on the murdered women, he breathed a silent curse.

A soft clack sounded almost at his shoulder. The assassin went rigid, then slowly turned his head. Apt crouched beside him, head ducked low, a long thread of drool hanging from its jaws. It blinked knowingly.

'This time, then?' Kalam whispered. 'Or come to watch?'

The demon gave nothing away. Naturally.

The assassin nocked the better of the two arrows, licked his fingers and ran them along the feather guides. There was little gain in elaborate planning. He had eight men to kill.

Still concealed by the high grass, he rose into a crouch, drawing the bowstring as he took a deep breath. He held both for a long moment.

It was the shot he needed. The arrow entered the troop commander's left eye and went straight through to the back of the skull, the iron point making a solid crunching sound as it drove into the bone. The man's head snapped back, skullcap helmet flying from his head.

Kalam was drawing for his second shot even as the body rocked, falling forward from the waist. He chose the man fastest to react, a big warrior with his back to the assassin.

The arrow went high – betrayed by a warped shaft. Sinking into the warrior's right shoulder, it was deflected off the blade and up under the rim of the helmet. Kalam's luck held as the man pitched forward onto the fire, instantly dead. Sparks rose as the body swallowed up the flames. Darkness swept down like a cloak.

The assassin dropped the bow and closed swiftly on the shouting, frightened men. A brace of knives in his right hand, Kalam selected his targets. His left hand was a blur as he threw the first knife. A warrior screamed. Another caught sight of the assassin.

Kalam unsheathed his long-knife and close-work dagger. A tulwar flashed at his head. He ducked, stepped close and stabbed the man under the chin. With no solid bone to bite down on the dagger blade, he was instantly able to withdraw it, in time to parry a lance thrust, take another step and stab the long-knife's point into a man's throat.

A tulwar skidded across his shoulders, the blow too wild to penetrate the chain under Kalam's telaba. He spun, a backhand slice opening the attacker's cheek and nose. The man reeled.

The assassin kicked him away. The three warriors still prepared to fight, and Bordu's guard, all backed off to regroup. Their reaction made it clear that they imagined that a whole squad had attacked them. Kalam took advantage of their frantic searching of the shadows to finish off the man whose face he'd cut.

'Spread out!' one of the warriors hissed. 'Jelem, Hanor, get the crossbows —'

Waiting for that was suicide. Kalam attacked, rushing the man who'd taken command. He backed off desperately, the tulwar in his hand twitching in every direction as he tried to follow the assassin's intricate feints, hoping to catch the one feint that was in fact the genuine attack. Then instinct made the man abandon the effort and lash out in a counterattack.

Which the assassin had been waiting for. He intercepted the downward swing at the man's wrist – with the point of his dagger. Spitting his arm on the blade, the warrior screamed in pain, weapon flying from a spasming hand.

Kalam thrust the long-knife into the man's chest, ducked and spun to evade a rushing attack from Bordu's guard. The move was a surprise, since the assassin had not expected to find much courage in the man. He came very close to dying then. Straightening inside the guard's reach was all that saved him. Kalam drove his dagger low, stabbing just under the man's belt buckle. Hot fluid gushed over the assassin's forearm. The guard shrieked, doubling over, trapping both knife and the hand gripping it.

The assassin surrendered the weapon and stepped around the guard.

The remaining two warriors crouched twenty feet away, loading their crossbows. The weapons were Malazan, assault-issue, and both men revealed a fatal lack of familiarity with the loading mechanisms. Kalam himself could ready such a crossbow in four seconds.

He did not grant the warriors even that, closing with them in a flash. One still tried to lock the crank, his frantic terror undoing his efforts as the quarrel jumped from its slot and fell to the ground. The other man tossed his crossbow down with a snarl and retrieved his tulwar in time to meet Kalam's charge. He had advantage in both the reach and weight of his weapon, yet neither availed him when a sudden loss of courage froze him in his tracks.

'Please—'

The word rode his last breath as Kalam batted the tulwar aside and cross-swung his long-knife's razor-sharp edge, opening the warrior's throat. The swing continued, spinning to transform into a sideways thrust that pierced the other man's chest, through boiled leather, skin, between ribs and into the lung. Choking, the warrior crumpled. The assassin finished him with another thrust.

Behind the moans of Bordu's guard lay silence. From a copse of low trees thirty paces down the river bed came the first peeps of birds awakening to

dawn. Kalam dropped to one knee, sucking in lungfuls of sweet, cool air.

He heard a horse descend the south bank and turned to see Minala. The crossbow in her hands pointed from one corpse to the next as she checked the clearing, then she visibly relaxed, fixing Kalam with wide eyes. 'I count eight.'

Still struggling for breath, the assassin nodded. He reached out and cleaned his long-knife's blade and hilt on his last victim's telaba, then checked the weapon's edge before sheathing it at his side.

Bordu's guard finally fell silent.

'Eight.'

'How's the captain?'

'Awake. Groggy, maybe fevered.'

'There's another clearing about forty paces east of here,' Kalam said. 'I suggest we camp there for the day. I need some sleep.'

'Yes.'

'We need to strip this camp ... the bodies...'

'Leave that to Selv and me. We don't shock easily. Any more...'

With a grunt the assassin straightened and went to retrieve his other weapons. Minala watched him.

'There were two others,' she said.

Kalam paused over a body, looked up. 'What?'

'Guarding the horses. They look...' She hesitated, then continued grimly, 'They were torn to pieces. Big chunks ... missing. Bite marks.'

The assassin voiced a second grunt, rose slowly. 'I hadn't had much to eat lately,' he muttered.

'Maybe a plains bear, the big brown kind. Took advantage of the ruckus to ambush the two guards. Did you hear the horses screaming?'

'Maybe.' He studied her face, wondering what was going on behind those almost silver eyes.

'I didn't, but there were plenty of screams and sound does jump around in river beds like these. Anyway, it'll do as an explanation, don't you think?'

'Just might.'

'Good. I'll ride back for the others now. I won't be long.'

She swung her mount around without using the reins, since she still held the crossbow in her hands. Kalam wasn't sure how she managed it. He recalled her crouch over one stirrup hours earlier, her dance across the saddles. *This woman can sit a horse.*

As she rode back up the bank, the assassin surveyed the grisly camp. 'Hood,' he breathed, 'I need a rest.'

'Kalam, who rode with Whiskeyjack across Raraku . . .' Captain Keneb shook his head and poked again at the fire.

It was dusk. The assassin had just awakened from a long, deep sleep. His first hour was never a pleasant one. Aching joints, old wounds – his years always caught up with him while he slept. Selv had brewed a strong tea. She poured Kalam a cup. He stared into the dying flames.

Minala said, 'I would never have believed that one man could kill eight, all within minutes.'

'Kalam was recruited into the Claw,' Keneb said. 'That's rare. They usually take children, train them—'

'Train?' the assassin grunted. 'Indoctrination.' He looked up at Minala. 'Attacking a group of warriors isn't as impossible as you think. For the lone attacker, there's no-one else to make the first move. Eight – ten men ... well, they figure they should just all close in and hack me down. Only, who goes first? They all pause, they all look for an opening. It's my job to keep moving, make sure every opening is closed before they can react. Mind you, a good veteran squad knows how to work together...'

'Then you were lucky they didn't.'

'I was lucky.'

The older boy, Kesen, spoke up. 'Can you teach me how to fight like that, sir?'

Kalam grunted. 'I expect your father has a better life in mind for you, lad. Fighting is for people who fail at everything else.'

'But fighting isn't the same as soldiering,' Keneb said.

'That's a fact,' the assassin agreed, sensing that he'd somehow stung the captain's pride. 'Soldiers are worth respect, and it's true that sometimes fighting's required. Soldiering means standing firm when that time comes. So, lad, if you still want to learn how to fight, learn how to soldier first.'

'In other words, listen to your father,' Minala said, giving Kalam a quick, wry smile.

Following some gesture or look the assassin did not catch, Selv rose and led the boys off to finish breaking camp. As soon as they were out of earshot Keneb said, 'Aren's what, three months away? Hood's breath, there has to be a Malazan-held city or fortification that's closer than that, Corporal.'

'All the news I've heard has been bad,' Kalam said. 'Everything south of here is tribal lands, all the way to the River Vathar. Ubaryd's close to the river, but I'd guess it's been taken by Sha'ik's Apocalypse – too valuable a port to leave unsecured. Secondly, I would think most of the tribes between here and Aren have set off to join Kamist Reloe.'

Keneb looked startled. 'Reloe?'

Kalam frowned. 'The bandits spoke of him as being southeast of here ...'

'More east than south. Reloe is chasing Fist Coltaine and the Seventh Army. He's probably wiped them out by now, but even so his forces are east of the Sekala River and that's the territory he's been charged to hold.'

'You know much more of this than I,' the assassin said.

'We had Tithansi servants,' Minala explained. 'Loyal.'

'They paid for that with their lives,' the captain added.

'Then is there an army of the Apocalypse south of here?'

Keneb nodded. 'Aye, preparing to march on Aren.'

The assassin frowned. 'Tell me, Captain . . . you ever heard the word "Jhistal"?'

'No, not Seven Cities. Why?'

'The bandits spoke of "a jhistal inside" Aren. As if it was a shaved knuckle.' He fell silent for a moment, then sighed. 'Who commands this army?'

'That bastard Korbolo Dom.'

Kalam's eyes narrowed. 'But he's a Fist—'

'Was, till he married a local woman who just happened to be the daughter of Halaf's last Holy Protector. He's turned renegade, had to execute half his own legion who refused to step across with him. The other half divested the Imperial uniform, proclaimed themselves a mercenary company, and took on Korbolo's contract. It was that company that hit us in Orbal. Call themselves the Whirlwind Legion or something like that.' Keneb rose and kicked at the fire, scattering the last embers. 'They rode in like allies. We didn't suspect a thing.'

There was more to this tale, the assassin sensed. 'I remember Korbolo,' Kalam muttered.

'Thought you might. He was Whiskeyjack's replacement, wasn't he?'

'For a time. After Raraku. A superb tactician, but a little too bloodthirsty for my tastes. For Laseen, too, which was why she holed him in Halaf.'

'And promoted Dujek instead.' The captain laughed. 'Who's now been outlawed.'

'Now there's an injustice I'll tell you about some day,' Kalam said, rising. 'We should get going. Those raiders may have friends nearby.'

He felt Minala's eyes on him as he readied his horse and was not a little disturbed. Husband dead only twenty-four hours ago. An anchor cut away. Kalam was a stranger who'd as much as taken charge despite being outranked by her brother-in-law. She must have thought for the first time in a long time that they stood a chance of surviving with him along. It was not a responsibility he welcomed. *Still, I've always appreciated capable women. Only an interest this soon after her husband's death is like a flower on a dead stalk. Attractive but not for long.* She was capable, but if he let her, her own needs would end up undermining that capability. Not *good for her. And besides, if I led this one on, she'd stop being what attracted me to her in the first place. Best to leave well alone. Best to stay remote.*

'Corporal Kalam,' Minala said behind him.

He swung about. 'What?'

'Those women. I think we should bury them.'

The assassin hesitated, then resumed checking his horse's girth strap. 'No time,' he grunted. 'Worry about the living, not the dead.'

Her voice hardened. 'I am. There are two young boys who need to be reminded about respect.'

'Not now.' He faced her again. 'Respect won't help them if they're dead, or worse. See that everyone else is ready to ride, then get to your horse.'

'Captain gives the orders,' she said, paling.

'He's got a busted head and keeps thinking this is a picnic. Watch the times he comes round – his eyes fill with fear. And here you go wanting to add yet another burden on the man. Even the slightest nudge might make him retreat into his head for good, and then what use is he? To anyone?'

'Fine,' she snapped, whirling away.

He watched her stalk off. Selv and Keneb stood by their horses, too far away to have heard anything but close enough to know that dark waters had

been stirred between Minala and the assassin. A moment later the children rode into view on a single horse, the seven-year-old in front and sitting tall with his younger brother's arms wrapped around him. Both looked older than their years.

Respect for life. Sure. The other lesson is just how cheap that life can become. Maybe the former comes from the latter, in which case they're well on their way as it is.

'Ready,' Minala said in a cold voice.

Kalam swung into the saddle. He scanned the growing darkness. *Stay close,* Apt. *Only not too close.*

They rode out of the river bed and onto the grassy Odhan, Kalam in the lead. Luckily, the demon was shy.

The rogue wave took them from the port side, a thick, sludgy wall that seemed to leap over the railing, crashing down on the deck like a landslide of mud. The water drained from the silts within seconds, leaving Felisin and the others on the main deck knee-deep in the foul-smelling muck. The pyramid of heads was a shapeless mound.

Crawling, Heboric reached her, his face smeared a dull ochre. 'This silt!' he gasped, pausing to spit some from his mouth. 'Look at what's in it!'

Almost too miserable to respond, she nevertheless reached down and scooped up a handful. 'It's full of seeds,' she said. 'And rotting plants—'

'Aye! Grass seeds and rotting grasses – don't you understand, lass? That's not sea bottom down there. It's prairie. Inundated. This warren's flooded. Recently.'

She grunted, unwilling to share in his excitement. 'That's a surprise? Can't sail a ship on prairie, can you?'

His eyes narrowed. 'You got something there, Felisin.'

The silt around her shins felt strange, crawling, restless. Ignoring the ex-priest, she clambered her way towards the stern-castle. The wave had not gone that high. Gesler and Stormy were both at the steering oar, all four hands needed to maintain a course. Kulp was near them, waiting to relieve the first man whose strength gave out. And he'd been waiting long enough for it to be obvious that Gesler and Stormy were locked in a battle of pride, neither one wanting to surrender before the other. Their bared grins confirmed it for Felisin. *Idiots! They'll both collapse at once, leaving the mage to handle the steering oar by himself.*

The sky continued to convulse over them, lashing lightning in all directions. The surface of the sea resisted the shrieking wind, the silt-heavy water lifting in turgid swells that seemed reluctant to go anywhere. The headless oarsmen continued their ceaseless rowing, though a dozen oars had snapped, the splintered shafts keeping time with those still pushing water. The drum beat on, answering the thunder overhead with its measured, impervious patience.

She reached the steps and climbed clear of the mud, then stopped in surprise. The silt fled her skin as if alive, poured down from her legs to rejoin the quaking pool that covered the main deck.

Crouched near the main mast, Heboric yelled in sudden alarm, eyes on the mud surrounding him as its shivering increased. 'There's something in it!'

'Come this way!' Truth shouted from the forecastle steps, reaching out with one hand. Baudin anchored him with a single-handed grip on the lad's other arm. 'Quick! Something's coming out!'

Felisin climbed another step higher.

The mud was transmogrifying, coalescing into the shapes of figures. Flint blades appeared, some grey, some the deep red of chalcedony. Bedraggled fur slowly sprouted, riding broad, bony shoulders. Bone helmets gleamed polished gold and brown – the skulls of beasts that Felisin could not imagine existing anywhere. Long ropes of filthy hair were now visible, mostly black or brown. The mud did not so much fall away as *change.* These creatures were one with the clay.

'T'lan Imass!' Kulp shouted from where he stood clinging to the mizzen mast. *Silanda* was rocking with a wild energy. 'Logros T'lan!'

They numbered six. All wore furs except one, who was smaller than the others and last to appear. It was bedecked in the oily, ragged feathers of colourful birds, and its long hair was iron grey streaked with red. Shell, antler and bone jewellery hung from its rotting hide shirt, but it appeared to carry no weapons.

Their faces were withered, the bones underneath close to the surface and robust. The sockets of their eyes were black pits. The wiry remnants of beards remained, except on the silver-haired one, who now straightened and faced Kulp.

'Stand aside, Servant of the Chained One, we have come for our kin, and for the Tiste Edur.' The voice was a woman's, the language Malazan.

Another T'lan Imass turned to the silver-haired one. It was by far the biggest of the group. The fur humped over its shoulders came from some kind of bear, the hairs were silver-tipped. 'Mortal worshippers are a bane themselves,' it said in a bored tone. 'We should kill them as well.'

'We shall,' the other one said. 'But our quarry comes first.'

'There are no kin of yours here,' Kulp said shakily. 'And the Tiste Edur are dead. Go see for yourself. In the captain's cabin.'

The female T'lan Imass cocked her head. Two of her companions strode towards the hatch. She then swung about and stared at Heboric, who stood by the forecastle railing. 'Call down the mage linked to you. He is a wound. And he spreads. This must be stopped. More, tell your god that such games place him in great peril. We shall not brook such damage to the warrens.'

Felisin laughed, the sound tinged with hysteria.

As one, the T'lan Imass looked at her.

She flinched from those lifeless gazes, then drew a breath to steady herself. 'You may be immortal and powerful enough to threaten the boar god,' she said, 'but you haven't got one thing right yet.'

'Explain,' the female said.

'Ask someone who cares,' she said, meeting that depthless gaze, surprised that she neither flinched nor broke away.

'I am no longer a priest of Fener,' Heboric said, raising both stumps. 'If the boar god is here, among us, then I am not aware of it, nor do I much care. The sorcerer riding this storm pursues us, seeking to destroy us. I know not why.'

'He is the madness of Otataral,' the female said.

The two Imass sent to the cabin now returned. Though no words were spoken aloud, the female nodded. 'They are dead, then. And our kin have departed. We must continue the hunt.' She swung her gaze back to Heboric. 'I would lay hands upon you.'

Felisin barked another laugh. 'That'll make him complete.'

'Shut up, girl,' Kulp growled, pushing past to descend to the main deck. 'We're not Servants of the Chained One,' he said. 'Hood's breath, what *is* the Chained One? Never mind, I don't even want to know. We're on this ship by accident, not design—'

'We did not anticipate this warren would be flooded,' the female said.

'It's said you can cross oceans,' the mage muttered, frowning. Felisin could see he was having trouble following the "Plan Imass's statements. So was she.

'We can cross bodies of water,' the female acknowledged.

'But we can only find our shapes on land.'

'So, like us, you came to this ship to get your feet dry—'

'And complete our task. We pursue renegade kin.'

'If they were here, they've since left,' Kulp said. 'Before we arrived. You are a Bonecaster.'

The female inclined her head. 'Hentos Ilm, of Logros T'lann

Imass.'

'And the Logros no longer serve the Malazan Empire. Glad to see you're staying busy.' 'Why?'

'Never mind.' Kulp looked skyward. 'He's eased up some.' 'He senses us,' Hentos Ilm said. She faced Heboric again.

'Your left hand is in balance, it is true. Otataral and a power unknown to me. If the mage in the storm continues to grow in power, the Otataral shall prevail, and you too shall know its madness.'

'I want it gone from me,' Heboric growled. 'Please.' Hentos Ilm shrugged, and approached the ex-priest. 'We must destroy the one in the skies. Then we must seal the warren's wound.'

'In other words,' Felisin said, 'you're probably not worth the trouble, old man.'

'Bonecaster,' Kulp said. 'What warren is this?'

Hentos Ilm paused, attention still on Heboric. 'Elder.

Kurald Emurlahn.'

'I've heard of Kurald Galain – the Tiste Andii warren.' 'This is Tiste Edur. You surprise me, Mage. You are Meanas

Rashan, which is the branch of Kurald Emurlahn accessible to mortal humans. The warren you use is the child of this place.'

Kulp was scowling at the Bonecaster's back. 'This makes no sense. Meanas Rashan is the warren of Shadow. Of Ammanas and Cotillion, and the Hounds.'

'Before Shadowthrone and Cotillion,' Hentos Ilm said, 'there were Tiste Edur.' The Bonecaster reached towards Heboric. 'I would touch you.'

'Be my guest,' he said.

Felisin watched her place the palm of one withered hand against the old man's chest. After a moment she stepped back and turned away as if

dismissing him. She addressed the bear-furred T'lan Imass who'd spoken earlier. 'You are clanless, Legana Breed.'

'I am clanless,' he agreed.

She pointed at Kulp. 'Mage. Do nothing.'

'Wait!' Heboric said. 'What did you sense in me?'

'You are shorn from your god, though he continues to make use of you. I see no other purpose in your existence.'

Felisin bit back a nasty comment. *Not this one.* She could see Heboric's shoulders slowly sag, as if some vital essence had been pulled, pulped and dripping blood, from his chest. He'd clung hard to something, and the Bonecaster had just pronounced it dead. I'm *running out of things to wound in him. Maybe that'll keep* me *from trying.*

Hentos Ilm tilted her head back, then began dissolving, the dust of her being spinning in place. A moment later it spiralled upward, swiftly vanishing in the low clouds boiling overhead.

Lightning cracked, a rap of pain in Felisin's ears. Crying out, she fell to her knees. The others suffered in like manner, with the exception of the remaining T'lan Imass, who stood in motionless indifference. The *Silanda* bucked. The mud-smeared pyramid of severed heads around the main mast collapsed. Heads tumbled and bounced heavily on the deck.

The T'lan Imass spun at that, weapons suddenly out.

Thunder bellowed in the roiling stormclouds. The air shivered again.

The one named Legana Breed reached down and lifted one head by its long, black hair. It was Tiste Andii, a woman. 'She still lives,' the undead warrior said, revealing a muted hint of surprise. 'Kurald Emurlahn, the sorcery has locked their souls to their flesh.'

A faint shriek bounced down through the clouds, a sound filled with despair and – jarringly – release. The clouds spilled out in every direction, tearing into thin wisps. A pale amber sky burned through. The storm was gone, and so too was the mad sorcerer.

Felisin ducked as something winged past her, leaving in its wake a musty, dead smell. When she looked up Hentos Ilm stood once again on the main deck, facing Legana Breed. Neither moved, suggesting a silent conversation was underway.

'Hood's breath,' Kulp breathed beside Felisin. She glanced over. He was staring into the sky, his face pale. She followed his gaze.

A vast, black lesion, rimmed in fiery red and as large as a full moon, marred the amber sky. Whatever leaked from it seemed to steal into Felisin through her eyes, as if the act of simply seeing it was capable of transmitting an infection, a disease that would spread through her flesh. *Like the poison of a bloodfly. A* small whimper escaped her throat, then she desperately pulled her eyes away.

Kulp still stared, his face getting whiter, his mouth hanging listlessly. Felisin nudged him. 'Kulp!' He did not respond. She struck him.

Gesler was suddenly beside them, wrapping an arm around Kulp's eyes. 'Dammit, Mage, snap out of it!'

Kulp struggled, then relaxed. She saw him nod. 'Let him go now,' she said to the corporal.

As soon as Gesler relinquished his hold, the mage rounded on Hentos Ilm. His voice was a shaken rasp. 'That's the wound you mentioned, isn't it? It's spreading – I can feel it, like a cancer—'

'A soul must bridge it,' the Bonecaster said.

Legana Breed was on the move. All eyes followed him as he strode to the sterncastle steps, ascended and stood before Stormy. The scarred veteran did not recoil.

'Well,' the marine muttered, 'this is as close as I've ever been.' His grin was sickly. 'Once is enough.'

The T'lan Imass raised his grey flint sword.

'Hold it,' Gesler growled. 'If you need a soul to stopper that wound ... use mine.'

Legana Breed's head pivoted.

Gesler's jaw clenched. He nodded.

'Insufficient,' Hentos Ilm pronounced.

Legana Breed faced Stormy again. 'I am the last of my clan,' he rumbled. 'L'echae Shayn shall end. This weapon is our memory. Carry it, mortal. Learn its weight. Stone ever thirsts for blood.' He offered the marine the four-foot-long sword.

Face blank, Stormy accepted it. Felisin saw the muscles of his forearms stiffen as they took the weight and held it.

'Now,' Hentos Ilm said.

Legana Breed stepped back and collapsed in a column of dust. The column twisted, spinning in on itself. The air on all sides stirred, then swept inward, pulled to the whirling emanation. A moment later the wind fell away and Legana Breed was gone. The remaining T'lan Imass turned and lifted their gazes skyward.

Felisin was never certain whether she only imagined seeing the T'lan Imass reassume his form upon striking the heart of that wound, a tiny, seemingly insignificant splayed figure that was quickly swallowed in the inky darkness. A moment later the wound's edges seemed to flinch, faint waves rippling outward. Then the lesion began folding in on itself.

Hentos Ilm continued staring upward. Finally she nodded. 'Sufficient. The wound is bridged.'

Stormy slowly lowered the flint sword's point until it rested on the deck.

A beat-up old veteran, knocked down cynical, just another of the Empire's cast-offs. He was clearly overwhelmed. *Insufficient, she said. Indeed.*

'We shall go now,' Hentos Ilm said.

Stormy shook himself. 'Bonecaster!'

There was obvious disdain in her tone as she said, 'Legana Breed claimed his right.'

The marine did not relent. 'This "bridging" ... tell me, is it a thing of pain?'

Hentos Ilm's shrug was an audible grate of bones, her only answer.

'Stormy—' Gesler warned, but his companion shook his head, descended to the main deck. As he approached the Bonecaster, another T'lan Imass stepped forward to block him.

'Soldier!' Gesler snapped. 'Stand off!'

But Stormy only moved back to clear space as he raised the flint sword.

The T'lan Imass facing him closed again, the motion a blur, one arm shooting out, the hand closing on Stormy's neck.

Cursing, Gesler pushed past Felisin, his own hand finding the sword's grip at his side. The corporal slowed when it became obvious that the T'lan Imass was simply holding Stormy. And the marine himself had gone perfectly still. Quiet words slipped between them. Then the undead warrior released his grip and stepped back. Stormy's anger had vanished. Something in the set of his shoulders reminded Felisin of Heboric.

All five T'lan Imass began to dissolve.

'Wait!' the mage shouted, rushing forward. 'How in Hood's name do we get out of here?'

It was too late. The creatures were gone.

Gesler rounded on Stormy. 'What did that bastard tell you?' he demanded.

The soldier's eyes were wet – shocking Felisin – as he turned to his corporal.

Gesler whispered, 'Stormy...'

'He said there was great pain,' the man muttered. 'I asked *How long?* He said For *ever.* The wound heals around him, you see. She couldn't command, you see. Not for something like that. He volunteered—' The man's throat closed up, then. He spun away, bolted through the gangway and out of sight.

'Clanless,' Heboric said from the forecastle. 'As good as useless. Existence without meaning ...'

Gesler kicked one of the severed heads across the deck. Its uneven thumping was loud in the still air. 'Who still wants to live for ever?' he growled, then spat.

Truth spoke, his voice quavering. 'Didn't anybody else see?' he asked. 'The Bonecaster didn't – I'm sure of it, she didn't...'

'What're you going on about, lad?' Gesler demanded.

'That T'lan Imass. He tied it to his belt. By the hair. His bear cloak hid it.'

'What?'

'He took one of the heads. Didn't anybody else see?'

Heboric was the first to react. With a wild grin he leapt down to the main deck, making for the galley. Even as he plunged through the doorway Kulp was clambering down to the first oar deck. He disappeared from view.

Minutes passed.

Gesler, still frowning, went to join Stormy and the ex-priest.

Kulp returned. 'One of them's dead as a post,' he said.

Felisin thought to ask him what it all meant, but a sudden exhaustion swept the impulse away. She looked around until she saw Baudin. He was at the prow, his back to everything ... to everyone. She wondered at his indifference. Lack of imagination, she concluded after a moment, the thought bringing a sneer to her lips. She made her way to him.

'All too much for you, eh, Baudin?' she asked, leaning beside him on the arching rail.

'T'lan Imass were never nothing but trouble,' he said. 'Always two sides to whatever they did, maybe more than two. Maybe hundreds.'

'A thug with opinions.'

'You set your every notion in stone, lass. No wonder people always surprise you.'

'Surprise? I'm way past surprise, thug. We're in something, every one of us. There's more to come, so you can forget about thinking of a way out. There isn't one.'

He grunted. 'Wise words for a change.'

'Don't soften up on me,' Felisin said. 'I'm just too tired to be cruel. Give me a few hours' sleep and I'll be back to my old self.'

'Planning ways to murder me, you mean.'

'Keeps me amused.'

He was silent a long moment, eyes on the meaningless horizon ahead, then he turned to her. 'You ever think that maybe what you are is what's trapping you inside whatever it is you're trapped inside?'

She blinked. There was a glint of sardonic judgement in his small, beastlike eyes. 'I'm not following you, Baudin.'

He smiled. 'Oh yes, you are, lass.'

CHAPTER TEN

> It is one thing to lead by example with half a dozen soldiers at your back. It is wholly another with ten thousand.
>
> *Life of Dassem Ultor*
> Duiker

It had been a week since Duiker came upon the trail left by the refugees from Caron Tepasi. They had obviously been driven south to place further strain on Coltaine's stumbling city in motion, the historian thought. There was nothing else in this ceaseless wasted land. The dry season had taken hold, the sun in the barren sky scorching the grasses until they looked and felt like brittle wire.

Day after day had rolled by, yet Duiker still could not catch up with the Fist and his train. The few times he had come within sight of the massive dust cloud, Reloe's Tithansi outriders had prevented the historian from getting any closer.

Somehow, Coltaine kept his forces moving, endlessly moving, driving for the Sekala River. *And from there? Does he make a stand, his back to the ancient ford?*

So Duiker rode in the train's wake. The detritus from the refugees diminished, yet grew more poignant. Tiny graves humped the old encampments; the short-bones of horses and cattle lay scattered about; an oft-repaired but finally abandoned wagon axle marked one departure point, the rest of the wagon dismantled and taken for spares. The latrine trenches reeked beneath clouds of flies.

Places where skirmishing had occurred revealed another story. Amidst the naked, unrecovered bodies of Tithansi horse-warriors were shattered

Wickan lances, the heads removed. Everything that could be reused had been stripped from the Tithansi bodies: leather thongs and straps, leggings and belts, weapons, even braids of hair. Dead horses were dragged away entire, leaving swathes of blood-matted grass in their wake.

Duiker was well past astonishment at anything he saw. Like the Tithansi tribesmen he'd occasionally exchanged words with, he'd begun to believe that Coltaine was something other than human, that he had carved his soldiers and every refugee into unyielding avatars of the impossible. Yet for all that, there was no hope for victory. Kamist Reloe's Apocalypse consisted of the armies of four cities and a dozen towns, countless tribes and a peasant horde as vast as an inland sea. And it was closing in, content for the moment simply to escort Coltaine to the Sekala River. Every current was drawing to that place. A battle was taking shape, an annihilation.

Duiker rode through the day, parched, hungry, wind-burned, his clothes reduced to rags. A straggler from the peasant army, an old man determined to join the last struggle. Tithansi riders knew him on sight and paid him little heed apart from a distant wave. Every two or three days a troop would join him, pass him bundles of food, water and feed for the horse. In some ways, he had become their icon, his journey symbolic, burdened with unasked-for significance. The historian felt pangs of guilt at that, yet accepted the gifts with genuine gratitude – they kept him and his horse alive.

Nonetheless, his faithful mount was wearing down. More and more each day Duiker led the animal by the reins.

Dusk approached. The distant dust cloud continued to march on, until the historian was certain that Coltaine's vanguard had reached the river. The Fist would insist that the entire train drive on through the night to the encampment that the vanguard was even now preparing. If Duiker was to have any chance of rejoining them, it would have to be this night.

He knew of the ford only from maps, and his recollection was frustratingly vague. The Sekala River averaged five hundred paces in width, flowing north to the Karas Sea. A small village squatted in the crook of two

hills a few hundred paces south of the ford itself. He seemed to remember something about an old oxbow, as well.

The dying day spread shadows across the land. The brightest of the night's stars glittered in the sky's deepening blue. Wings of capemoths rose with the heat that fled the parched ground, like black flakes of ash.

Duiker climbed back into the saddle. A small band of Tithansi outriders rode a ridge half a mile to the north. Duiker judged that he was at least a league from the river. The patrols of horsewarriors would increase the closer he approached. He had no plan for dealing with them.

The historian had walked his mount for most of the day, preparing for a hard ride into the night. He would need all that the beast could give him, and was afraid that it would not be enough. He nudged the mare into a trot.

The distant Tithansi paid him no attention, and soon rode out of sight. Heart thumping, Duiker urged his horse into a canter.

A wind brushed his face. The historian hissed a blessing to whatever god was responsible. The hanging dust cloud ahead began to edge his way.

The sky darkened.

A voice shouted a few hundred paces to his left. A dozen horsemen, strips of fur trailing from their lances. Tithansi. Duiker saluted them with a raised fist.

'With the dawn, old man!' one of them bellowed. 'It is suicide to attack now!'

'Ride to Reloe's camp!' another yelled. 'Northwest, old man – you are heading for the enemy lines!'

Duiker waved their words away, gesturing like a madman. He rose slightly in the saddle, whispered into the mare's ear, squeezed gently with his knees. The animal's head ducked forward, the strides lengthened.

Reaching the crest of a low hill, the historian finally saw what was arrayed before him. The encampment of the Tithansi lancers lay ahead and to his right, a thousand or more hide tents, the gleam of cooking fires.

Mounted patrols moved in a restless line beyond the tents, protecting the camp from the enemy forces dug in at the ford. To the left of the Tithansi camp spread a score thousand makeshift tents – the peasant army. Smoke hung like an ash-stained cloak over the sprawling tattered shanty town. Meals were being cooked. Outlying pickets consisted of entrenchments, again facing the river. Between the two encampments there was a corridor, no more than two wagons wide, running down the sloping floodplain to meet Coltaine's earthen defences.

Duiker angled his horse down the corridor, riding at full gallop. The Tithansi outriders behind him had not pursued, though the warriors patrolling the encampment now watched him, converging but without obvious concern ... yet.

As he cleared the inside edge of the tribe's camp on his right, then the peasants' sea of tents on his left, he saw raised earthworks, orderly rows of tents, solidly manned pickets – the horde had additional protection. The historian saw two banners, Sialk and Hissar – regular infantry. Helmed heads had turned, eyes drawn to the sound of his horse's hooves and now the alarmed shouts of the Tithansi riders.

The mare was straining. Coltaine's pickets were five hundred paces ahead, seeming to get no nearer. He heard horses in pursuit, gaining. Figures appeared on the Malazan bulwarks, readying bows. The historian prayed for quick-witted minds among the soldiers he rode towards. He cursed as he saw the bows raised, then drawn back.

'Not me, you bastards!' he bellowed in Malazan.

The bows loosed. Arrows sped unseen in the night.

Horses screamed behind him. His pursuers were drawing rein. More arrows flew. Duiker risked one backward glance and saw the Tithansi scrambling to withdraw out of arrow range. Thrashing horses and bodies lay on the ground.

He slowed the mare to a canter, then a trot as he approached the earthworks. She was lathered, her limbs far too loose, her head sagging.

Duiker rode into the midst of blue-skinned Wickans – Weasel Clan – who stared at him in silence. As he glanced around, the historian felt himself in well-suited company – the plains warriors from northeast Quon Tali had the look of spectres, their faces drawn with an exhaustion to match his own.

Beyond the Weasel Clan's encampment were military-issue tents and two banners – the Hissari Guard who had remained loyal, and a company whose standard Duiker did not recognize, apart from a central stylized crossbow signifying Malazan Marines.

Hands reached up to help him from the saddle. Wickan youths and elders gathered around, a soothing murmur of voices rising. Their concern was for the mare. An old man gripped the historian's arm. 'We will tend to this brave horse, stranger.'

'I think she's finished,' Duiker said, a wave of sorrow flooding him. *Gods, I'm tired.* The setting sun broke through the clouds on the horizon, bathing everything in a golden glow.

The old man shook his head. 'Our horsewives are skilled in such things. She shall run again. Now, an officer comes – go.'

A captain from the unknown company of Marines approached. He was Falari, his beard and long, wavy hair a fiery red. 'You rode in your saddle like a Malazan,' he said, 'yet dress like a damned Dosii. Explain yourself and be quick about it.'

'Duiker, Imperial Historian. I've been trying to rejoin this train since it left Hissar.'

The captain's eyes widened. 'A hundred and sixty leagues – you expect me to believe that? Coltaine left Hissar almost three months ago.'

'I know. Where's Bult? Has Kulp rejoined the Seventh? And who in Hood's name are you?'

'Lull, Captain of the Sialk Marines, Cartheron Wing, Sahul Fleet. Coltaine's called a briefing – you'd better come along, Historian.'

They began making their way through the encampment. Duiker was appalled at what he saw. Beyond the ragged entrenchments of the Marines was a broad, sloping field, a single roped road running through it. On the right were wagons in their hundreds, their beds crowded with wounded. The wagon wheels were sunk deep in blood-soaked mud. Birds filled the torchlit air, voicing a frenzied chorus – it seemed they had acquired a taste for blood. On the left the churned field was a solid mass of cattle, shoulder to shoulder, shifting in a seething tide beneath a hovering haze of rhizan – the winged lizards feasting on the swarms of flies.

Ahead, the field dropped away to a strip of marsh bridged by wooden slats. The swampy pools of water gleamed red. Beyond it was a broad humped-back oxbow island on which, in crowded mayhem, were encamped the refugees – in their tens of thousands.

'Hood's breath,' the historian muttered, 'are we going to have to walk through that?'

The captain shook his head and gestured towards a large farmhouse on the cattle side of the ford road. 'There, Coltaine's own Crow Clan are guarding the south side, along the hills, making sure none of the livestock strays or gets plucked by the locals – there's a village over on the other side.'

'Did you say Sahul Fleet? Why aren't you with Admiral Nok in Aren, Captain?'

The red-haired soldier grimaced. 'Wish we were. We left the fleet and pulled up in Sialk for repairs – our transport was seventy years old, started shipping water two hours out from Hissar. The mutiny happened the same night, so we left the ship, gathered up what was left of the local Marine company, then escorted the exodus out of Sialk.'

The farmhouse they approached was a sturdy, imposing structure, its inhabitants having just fled the arrival of Coltaine's train. Its foundation was of cut stone, and the walls were split logs chinked with sun-fired clay. A soldier of the Seventh stood guard in front of a solid oak door. He nodded to Captain Lull, then narrowed his eyes on Duiker.

'Ignore the tribal garb,' Lull told him, 'this one's ours. Who's here?'

'Everybody but the Fist, the Warlocks and the captain of the sappers, sir.'

'Forget the captain,' Lull said. 'He ain't bothered showing for one of these yet.'

'Yes sir.' The soldier thumped a gauntleted fist on the door, then pushed it open.

Woodsmoke drifted out. Duiker and the captain stepped inside. Bult and two officers of the Seventh were crouched at the massive stone fireplace at the room's far end, arguing over what was obviously a blocked chimney.

Lull unclipped his sword belt and hung the weapon on a hook by the door. 'What in Hood's name are you building a fire for?' he demanded. 'Ain't it hot and stinking enough in here?' He waved at the smoke.

One of the Seventh's officers turned and Duiker recognized him as the soldier who'd stood at his side when Coltaine and his Wickans first landed in Hissar. Their eyes met.

'Togg's feet, it's the historian!'

Bult straightened and swung around. Scar and mouth both shifted into twin grins. 'Sormo was right – he'd sniffed you on our trail weeks back. Welcome, Duiker!'

His legs threatening to give way under him, Duiker sat down in one of the chairs pushed against a wall. 'Good to see you, Uncle,' he said, leaning back and wincing at his aching muscles.

'We were going to brew some herbal tea,' the Wickan said, his eyes red and watering. The old veteran had lost weight, his pallor grey with exhaustion.

'For the love of clear lungs give it up,' Lull said. 'What's keeping the Fist anyway? I can't wait to hear what mad scheme he's concocted to get us out of this one.'

'He's pulled it off this far,' Duiker said.

'Against one army, sure,' Lull said, 'but we're facing two now—'

The historian lifted his head. 'Two?'

'The liberators of Guran,' the captain known to Duiker said. 'Can't recall if we were ever introduced. I'm Chenned. That's Captain Sulmar.'

'You're it for the Seventh's ranking officers?'

Chenned grinned. 'Afraid so.'

Captain Sulmar grunted. 'Not quite. There's the man in charge of the Seventh's sappers.'

'The one who never shows at these briefings.'

'Aye.' Sulmar looked dour, but Duiker already suspected that the expression was the captain's favourite. He was dark, short, appearing to have Kanese and Dal Honese blood in his ancestry. His shoulders sloped as if carrying a lifetime of burdens. 'Though why the bastard thinks he's above the rest of us I don't know. Damned sappers've been doing nothing but repairing wagons and collecting big chunks of stone and getting in the cutters' way.'

'Bult commands us in the field,' Captain Chenned said.

'I am the Fist's will,' the Wickan veteran rumbled.

There was the sound of horses pulling up outside, the jangle of tack and armour, then the door thumped once and a moment later swung open.

Coltaine looked unchanged to Duiker's eyes, as straight as a spear, his lean face wind-burned to the colour and consistency of leather, his black feather cape bellying in his wake as he strode into the centre of the large room. Behind him came Sormo E'nath and half a dozen Wickan youths who spread out to array themselves haphazardly against walls and pieces of furniture. They reminded the historian of a pack of dock rats in Malaz City, lords over the small patch they held.

Sormo walked up to Duiker and held out both hands to grip his wrists. Their eyes met. 'Our patience is rewarded. Well done, Duiker!'

The boy looked infinitely older, lifetimes closing in around his hooded eyes.

'Rest later, Historian,' Coltaine said, fixing each person in the room with a slow, gauging study. 'I made my command clear,' he said, turning at last to Bult. 'Where is this captain of the Engineers?'

Bult shrugged. 'Word was sent. He's a hard man to find.'

Coltaine scowled. 'Captain Chenned, your report.'

'Third and Fifth companies are across the ford, digging in. The crossing's about four hundred and twenty paces, not counting the shallows on both sides, which add another twenty or so. Average depth is one and a half arm-spans. Width is between four and five most of the way, a few places narrower, a few wider. The bottom's about two fingers of muck over a solid spine of rocks.'

'The Foolish Dog Clan will join your companies on the other side,' Coltaine said. 'If the Guran forces try to take that side of the ford during the crossing, you will stop them.' The Fist wheeled to Captain Lull. 'You and the Weasel Clan shall guard this side while the wounded and the refugees cross. I will maintain position to the south, blocking the village road, until the way is clear.'

Captain Sulmar cleared his throat. 'About the order of crossing, Fist. The Council of Nobles will scream—'

'I care not. The wagons cross first, with the wounded. Then the livestock, then the refugees.'

'Perhaps if we split it up more,' Sulmar persisted, sweat glistening on his flat brow, 'a hundred cattle, then a hundred nobles—'

'Nobles?' Bult asked. 'You meant refugees, surely.'

'Of course—'

Captain Lull sneered at Sulmar. 'Trying to buy favours on both sides, are you? And here I thought you were a soldier of the Seventh.'

Sulmar's face darkened.

'Splitting the crossing would be suicide,' Chenned said.

'Aye,' Bult growled, eyeing Sulmar as if he was a piece of rancid meat.

'We've a responsibility—' the captain snapped before Coltaine cut him off with a snarled curse.

It was enough. There was silence in the room. From outside came the creak of wagon wheels.

Bult grunted. 'Mouthpiece ain't enough.'

The door opened a moment later and two men entered. The one in the lead wore a spotless light-blue brocaded coat. Whatever muscle he'd carried in youth had given way to fat, and that fat had withered with three months of desperate flight. With a face like a wrinkled leather bag, he nonetheless projected a coddled air that was now tinged with indignant hurt. The man a step behind him also wore fine clothes – although reduced by dust and sweat to little more than shapeless sacks hanging from his lean frame. He was bald, the skin of his scalp patchy with old sunburn. He squinted at the others with watery eyes, blinking rapidly.

The first nobleman spoke. 'Word of this gathering reached the Council belatedly—'

'Unofficially, too,' Bult muttered dryly.

The nobleman continued with the barest of pauses. 'Events such as these are admittedly concerned with military discussions for the most part, and Heavens forbid the Council involve itself with such matters. However, as representatives of the nearly thirty thousand refugees now gathered here, we have assembled a list of .. . issues ... that we would like to present to you.'

'You represent a few thousand nobles,' Captain Lull said, 'and as such your own Hood-damned interests and no-one else's, Nethpara. Save the piety for the latrines.'

Nethpara did not deign to acknowledge the captain's comments. His gaze held on Coltaine, awaiting a reply.

The Fist gave no sign that he was prepared to provide one. 'Find the sappers, Uncle,' he said to Bult. 'The wagons begin crossing in an hour.'

The veteran Wickan slowly nodded.

'We were expecting a night of rest,' Sulmar said, frowning. 'Everyone's dead on their feet—'

'An hour,' Coltaine growled. 'The wagons with the wounded first. I want at least four hundred across by dawn.'

Nethpara spoke, 'Please, Fist, reconsider this order of crossing. While my heart breaks for those wounded soldiers, your responsibility is to protect the refugees. More, it will be viewed by many in the Council as a grievous insult that the livestock should cross before unarmed civilians of the Empire.'

'And if we lose the cattle?' Lull asked the nobleman. 'I suppose you could spit the orphaned children over a fire.'

Nethpara smiled resignedly. 'Ah, yes, the matter of the reduced rations numbers in our list of concerns. We have it on good account that such reductions have not been applied to the soldiers of the Seventh. Perhaps a more balanced method of distribution could be considered? It is so very difficult to see the children wither away.'

'Less meat on their bones, eh?' Lull's face was flushed with barely restrained rage. 'Without well-fed soldiers between you and the Tithansi, your stomachs will be flopping around your knees in no time.'

'Get them out of here,' Coltaine said.

The other nobleman cleared his throat. 'While Nethpara speaks for the majority of the Council, his views are not unanimously held.' Ignoring the dark glare his companion threw him, the old man continued. 'I am here out of curiosity, nothing more. For example, these wagons filled with wounded – it seems there are many more wounded than I had imagined: the wagons are veritably crowded, yet there are close to three hundred and fifty of them. Two days ago we were carrying seven hundred soldiers, using perhaps a hundred and seventy-five wagons. Two small skirmishes have occurred

since then, yet we now have twice as many wagons being used to transport the wounded. More, the sappers have been crawling all over them, keeping everyone away even to the point of discouraging the efforts of the cutters. What, precisely, is being planned here?'

There was silence. Duiker saw the two captains of the Seventh exchange puzzled looks. Sulmar's baffled expression was almost comical as his mind stumbled back over the details presented by the old man. Only the Wickans seemed unaffected.

'We have spread the wounded out,' Bult said. 'Strengthened the side walls —'

'Ah, yes,' the nobleman said, pausing to dab his watering eyes with a grey handkerchief. 'So I first concluded. Yet why do those wagons now ride so heavy in the mud?'

'Is this really necessary, Tumlit?' Nethpara asked in exasperation. 'Technical nuances may be your fascination, but Hood knows, no-one else's. We were discussing the Council's position on certain vital issues. No permission shall be accorded such digressions—'

'Uncle,' Coltaine said.

Grinning, Bult grasped both noblemen by their arms and guided them firmly to the door. 'We've a crossing to plan,' he said. 'Digressions unwelcome.'

'Yet what of the stonecutters and the renderers—' Tumlit attempted.

'Out, the both of you!' Bult pushed them forward. Nethpara was wise enough to open the door just in time as the commander gave them a final shove. The two noblemen stumbled outside.

At a nod from Bult, the guard reached in and pulled the door shut.

Lull rolled his shoulders beneath the weight of his chain shirt. 'Anything we should know, Fist?'

'I'm concerned,' said Chenned after it was clear that Coltaine would not respond to Lull's question, 'about the depth of this ford. The crossing's

likely to be damned slow – not that there's much of a current, but with the mud underfoot and four and a half feet of water ain't nobody going to cross fast. Even on a horse.' He glanced at Lull. 'A fighting withdrawal won't be pretty.'

'You all know your positions and tasks,' Coltaine said. He swung to Sormo, eyes narrowing as he studied the warlock, then the children arrayed behind him. 'You'll each have a warlock,' he said to his officers. 'All communication will be through them. Dismissed.'

Duiker watched the officers and the children leave, until only Bult, Sormo and Coltaine remained.

The warlock conjured a jug seemingly from nowhere and passed it to his Fist. Coltaine drank down a mouthful, then passed it to Duiker. The Fist's eyes glittered. 'Historian, you've a story to tell us. You were with the Seventh's mage, Kulp. Rode out with him only hours before the uprising. Sormo cannot find the man ... anywhere. Dead?'

'I don't know,' Duiker said truthfully. 'We were split up.' He downed a mouthful from the jug, then stared at it in surprise. *Chilled ale, where did Sormo get this from?* He glanced at the warlock. 'You've searched for Kulp through your warren?'

The young man crossed his arms. 'A few times,' he replied. 'Not lately. The warrens have become ... difficult.'

'Lucky us,' Bult said.

'I don't understand.'

Sormo sighed. 'Recall our one ritual, Historian? The plague of D'ivers and Soletaken? They infest every warren now – at least on this continent. All are seeking the fabled Path of Hands. I have been forced to turn my efforts to the old ways, the sorceries of the land, of life spirits and totem beasts. Our enemy, the High Mage Kamist Reloe, does not possess such Elder knowledge. So he dares not unleash his magery against us. Not for weeks now.'

'Without it,' Coltaine said, 'Reloe is but a competent commander. Not a genius. His tactics are simplistic. He looks upon his massive army and lets his confidence undervalue the strength and will of his opponents.'

'He don't learn from his defeats, either,' Bult said.

Duiker held his gaze on Coltaine. 'Where do you lead this train, Fist?'

'Ubaryd.'

The historian blinked. *Two months away, at least.* 'We still hold that city, then?'

Silence stretched.

'You don't know,' Duiker said.

'No,' Bult said, retrieving the jug from the historian's hand and taking a mouthful.

'Now, Duiker,' Coltaine said, 'tell us of your journey.'

The historian had no intention of explaining his efforts regarding Heboric Light Touch. He sketched a tale that ran close enough to the truth, however, to sound convincing. He and Kulp had ridden to a coastal town to meet some old friends in a Marine detachment. Ill luck that it was the night of the Mutiny. Seeing an opportunity to pass through the enemy ranks in disguise, gathering information as he went, Duiker elected to ride. Kulp had joined the marines in an effort to sail south to Hissar's harbour. As he spoke, the muted sounds of wagons lurching into motion on the oxbow island reached the men.

It was loud enough for Kamist Reloe's soldiers to hear, and rightly guess that the crossing had begun. Duiker wondered how the Whirlwind commander would respond.

As the historian began elaborating on what he had observed of the enemy, Coltaine cut him off with a raised hand. 'If all your narratives are as dull, it's a wonder anyone reads them,' he muttered.

Smiling, Duiker leaned back and closed his eyes. 'Ah, Fist, it's the curse of history that those who should read them, never do. Besides, I am tired.'

'Uncle, find this old man a tent and a bedroll,' Coltaine said. 'Give him two hours. I want him up to witness as much of the crossing as possible. Let the events of the next day be written, lest history's lesson be lost to all who follow.'

'Two hours?' Duiker mumbled. 'I can't guarantee I won't have a blurry recollection, assuming I survive to record the tale.'

A hand shook his shoulder. The historian opened his eyes. He had fallen asleep in the chair. A blanket had been thrown across him, the Wickan wool foul-smelling and dubiously stained. A young corporal stood over him.

'Sir? You are to rise now.'

Every bone ached. Duiker scowled. 'What's your name, Corporal?'

'List, sir. Fifth Company, sir.'

Oh. Yes, the one who died and died in the mock engagements.

Only now did the composite roar from outside reach the historian's senses. He sat up. 'Hood's breath! Is that a battle out there?'

Corporal List shrugged. 'Not yet. Just the drovers and the livestock. They're crossing. There's been some clashes on the other side – the Guran army's arrived. But we're holding.'

Duiker flung the blanket aside and stood up. List handed him a battered tin cup.

'Careful, sir, it's hot.'

The historian stared down at the dark-brown liquid. 'What is it?'

'Don't know, sir. Something Wickan.'

He took a sip, wincing at the scalding, bitter taste. 'Where is Coltaine? Something I forgot to tell him last night.'

'He rides with his Crow Clan.'

'What time is it?'

'Almost dawn.'

Almost dawn, and the cattle are only starting to cross? He felt himself becoming alert, glanced down again at the drink and took another sip. 'This one of Sormo's brews? It's got my nerves jumping.'

'Some old woman handed it to me, sir. Are you ready?'

'You've been assigned to me, List?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Your first task then, Corporal, is to direct me to the latrine.'

They stepped outside to mayhem. Cattle covered the oxbow island, a mass of humped backs slowly edging forward to the shouts of drovers. The other side of the Sekala was obscured in clouds of dust that had begun drifting over the river.

'This way, sir.' List gestured towards a trench behind the farmhouse.

'Dispense with the "sirs",' Duiker said as they headed towards the latrine. 'And find me a rider. Those soldiers on the other side have some serious trouble heading their way.'

'Sir?'

Duiker stood at the edge of the trench. He hitched back his telaba, then paused. 'There's blood in this trench.'

'Yes, sir. What was that about the other side of the river, sir?'

'Heard from some Tithansi outriders,' the historian said as he relieved his bladder. 'The Semk have come south. They'll be on the Guran side, I'd guess. That tribe has sorcerers, and their warriors put the fear in the Tithansi, so you can expect they're a nasty bunch. I'd planned on mentioning it last night but forgot.'

A troop of horsewarriors was passing in front of the house at that moment. Corporal List raced back to intercept them.

Duiker finished and rejoined his aide. He slowed. The troop's standard was instantly recognizable. List was breathlessly conveying the message to the commander. The historian shook off his hesitation and approached.

'Baria Setral.'

The Red Blade commander's eyes flicked to Duiker, went cold. Beside him his brother Mesker growled wordlessly.

'Seems your luck's held,' the historian said.

'And yours,' Baria rumbled. 'But not that white-haired mage. Too bad. I was looking forward to hanging his hide from our banner. This word of the Semk – from you?'

'From the Tithansi.'

Mesker barked a laugh and grinned. 'Shared their tents on the way, did you?' He faced his brother. 'It's a lie.'

Duiker sighed. 'What would be the point of that?'

'We ride to support the Seventh's advance picket,' Baria said. 'We shall pass on your warning.'

'It's a trap—'

'Shut up, brother,' Baria said, his eyes still on Duiker. 'A warning is just that. Not a lie, not a trap. If Semk show, we will be ready. If not, then the tale was false. Nothing surrendered.'

'Thank you, Commander,' Duiker said. 'We're on the same side, after all.'

'Better late than never,' Baria growled. A hint of a smile showed in his oiled beard. 'Historian.' He raised a gauntleted fist, opened it. At the gesture the troop of Red Blades resumed their canter to the ford, Mesker alone flinging a dark glare Duiker's way as he rode past.

The pale light of dawn edged its way into the valley. Above the Sekala an impenetrable cloud of dust eased crossways to the faint breeze, descending on the ford itself, then staying there. The entire crossing was obscured. Duiker grunted. 'Nice touch, that.'

'Sormo,' Corporal List said. 'It's said he's awakened the spirits of the land and the air. From a sleep of centuries, for even the tribes have left those ways behind. Sometimes you can ... smell them.'

The historian glanced at the young man. 'Smell?'

'Like when you flip a big rock over. The scent that comes up. Cool, musty.' He shrugged. 'Like that.'

An image of List as a boy – only a few years younger than he was now – flashed into Duiker's mind. Flipping rocks. A world to explore, the cocoon of peace. He smiled. 'I know that smell, List. Tell me, these spirits – how strong are they?'

'Sormo says they're pleased. Eager to play.'

'A spirit's game is a man's nightmare. Well, let's hope they take their play seriously.'

The mass of refugees – Duiker saw as he resumed his study of the situation – had been pushed off the oxbow island, across the ford road, to the south slope and swampy bed of the old oxbow channel. There were too many for the space provided, and he saw the far edge of the crowd creeping onto the hills beyond. A few had taken to the river, south of the ford, and were moving slowly out into the current.

'Who is in charge of the refugees?'

'Elements of the Crow Clan. Coltaine has his Wickans oversee them – the refugees are as scared of them as they are of the Apocalypse.'

And the Wickans *won't be* bought, *either.*

'There, sir!' List pointed to the east.

The enemy positions that Duiker had ridden between the night before had begun moving. The Sialk and Hissar infantry were on the right, Hissari lancers on the left and Tithansi horsewarriors down the centre. The two mounted forces surged forward towards the Weasel Clan's defences. Mounted Wickan bowmen accompanied by lancers rode out to meet them. But the thrust was a feint, the Hissari and Tithansi wheeling west before locking antlers. Their commanders had called it too fine, however, as the Wickan bowmen had edged into range. Arrows flew. Riders and horses fell.

Then it was the turn of the Wickan lancers to bolt forward in a sudden charge and their enemy quickly withdrew back to their original positions. Duiker watched in surprise as the lancers pulled up, a number of them dismounting as their bowmen kin covered them. Wounded enemy were summarily despatched, scalps and equipment taken. Ropes appeared. Minutes later the Wickans rode back to their defences, dragging the horse carcasses with them, along with a handful of wounded mounts they had managed to round up.

'The Wickans feed themselves,' List said. 'They'll use the hides, too. And the bones, and the tails and mane, and the teeth, and the—'

'Got it,' Duiker cut in.

The enemy infantry continued their slow march. The Hissari and Tithansi horsewarriors had recovered and now made a slower, more cautious approach.

'There's an old wall on the island,' List said. 'We could climb it and get a better view of all sides. If you don't mind walking on the backs of cattle to get there, that is. It's not as hard as it sounds – you just have to keep moving.'

Duiker raised an eyebrow.

'Honest, sir.'

'All right, Corporal. Lead the way.'

They took the roped road westward towards the ford. The old channel of the oxbow was bridged by wooden slats, bolstered with new supports

placed by the Seventh's sappers. This avenue was maintained to allow for the movement back and forth of mounted messengers, but, as everywhere else, chaos reigned. Duiker held close in List's wake as the corporal weaved and danced his way down to the bridge. Beyond it rose the hump of the island and thousands of cattle.

'Where did this herd come from?' the historian asked as they reached the slatted crossing.

'Purchased, for the most part,' List replied. 'Coltaine and his clans laid claim to land outside Hissar, then started buying up cattle, horses, oxen, mules, goats – just about anything on four legs.'

'When did all this happen?'

'About the same day they arrived,' the corporal said. 'When the uprising came, most of the Foolish Dog Clan was with the herds – the Tithansi tribes thought to snatch the livestock and got their noses bloodied instead.'

As they neared the trailing end of the herd the noise rose to a roar with shouting drovers, the bark of cattle-dogs – solidly muscled, half-wild beasts born and bred on the Wickan Plains – the lowing of the cattle and the ceaseless rumbling thunder of their hooves. The dust cloud engulfing the river was impenetrable.

Duiker's eyes narrowed on the seething mass ahead. 'Not sure about your idea, Corporal – these beasts look jumpy. We're likely to get crushed in seconds flat.'

A shout from behind caught their attention. A young Wickan girl was riding towards them.

'Nether,' List said.

Something in his tone pulled Duiker around. The lad was pale under his helmet.

The girl, no more than nine or ten, halted her horse before them. She was dark, her eyes like black liquid, her hair cut bristly short. The historian

recalled seeing her among Sormo's charges the night before. 'You seek the wall as vantage,' she said. 'I will clear you a path.'

List nodded.

'There is aspected magic on the other side,' she said, eyes on Duiker. 'A lone god's warren, no D'ivers, no Soletaken. A tribe's god.'

'Semk,' the historian said. 'The Red Blades are carrying word.' He fell silent as he realized the import of her words, the significance of her presence at the meeting last night. *One of the warlocks reborn. Sormo leads a clan of children empowered by lifetimes.*

'I go to face them. The spirit of the land is older than any god.' She guided her horse around the two men, then loosed a piercing cry. A clear avenue began to take shape, animals pushing away to either side and moaning in fear.

Nether rode down that aisle. After a moment List and Duiker followed, jogging to keep up. As soon as they trod on the path they could feel the earth shivering beneath their boots – not the deep reverberations of countless hooves, but something more intense, muscular. *As if we stride the spine of an enormous serpent. . . the land awakened, the land eager to show its power.*

Fifty paces ahead the ridge of a weathered, vine-cloaked wall appeared. Squat and thick, it was evidently the remnant of an ancient fortification, rising over a man's height and clear of the cattle. The path that Nether had created brushed one edge of it, then continued on down to the river.

The girl rode on without glancing back. Moments later List and Duiker reached the stone edifice and clambered up on its ragged but wide top.

'Look south,' List said, pointing.

Dust rose in a gold haze from the line of hills beyond the heaving mass of refugees.

'Coltaine and his Crows are in a fight,' List said.

Duiker nodded. 'There's a village on the other side of those hills, right?'

'Yes, sir. L'enbarl, it's called. The scrap looks to be on the road linking it to the ford. We haven't seen the Sialk cavalry, so it's likely Reloe sent them around to try and take our flank. Like Coltaine always says, the man's predictable.'

Duiker faced north. The other side of the island consisted of marsh grasses filling the old oxbow channel. The far side was a narrow stand of dead leadwood trees, then a broad slope leading to a steep-sided hill. The regularity of that hill suggested that it was a tel. Commanding its flat plateau was an army, weapons and armour glinting in the morning light. Heavy infantry. Dark banners rose amidst large tents behind two frontline legions of Tithansi archers. The archers had begun moving down the slope.

'That's Kamist Reloe and his hand-picked elites,' List said. 'He's yet to use them.'

To the east the feints and probes between the Weasel Clan's horsewarriors and their Tithansi and Hissari counterparts continued, while the Sialk and Hissar infantry steadily closed the distance to the Wickan defences. Behind these legions, the peasant army swirled in restless motion.

'If that horde decides to charge,' Duiker said, 'our lines won't hold.'

'They'll charge,' List affirmed grimly. 'If we're lucky, they'll wait too long and give us room to fall back.'

'That's the kind of risk Hood loves,' the historian muttered.

'The ground under them whispers fear. They won't be moving for a while.'

'Do I see control on all sides, or the illusion of control?'

List's face twisted slightly. 'Sometimes the two are one and the same. In terms of their effect, I mean. The only difference – or so Coltaine says – is that when you bloody the real thing, it absorbs the damage, while the other shatters.'

Duiker shook his head. 'Who would have imagined a Wickan warleader to think of war in such . . . alchemical terms? And you, Corporal, has he made you his protégé?'

The young man looked dour. 'I kept dying in the war games. Gave me lots of time to stand around and eavesdrop.'

The cattle were moving more quickly now, plunging into the stationary clouds of dust masking the ford. If anything, to Duiker's eyes the heaving flow was too quick. 'Four and a half feet deep, over four hundred paces... those animals should be crossing at a crawl. More, how to hold the herds to the shallows? Those dogs will have to swim, the drovers will get pushed off to the deeps, and with all that dust, who can see a damned thing down there?'

List said nothing.

Thunder sounded on the other side of the ford, followed by rapid percussive sounds. Columns of smoke pillared upward and the air was suddenly febrile. Sorcery. *The Semk wizard' priests.* A *lone child to oppose them.* 'This is all taking too long,' Duiker snapped. 'Why in Hood's name did it take all night just to get the wagons across? It will be dark before the refugees even move.'

'They're closing,' List said. His face was covered in dust-smeared sweat.

To the east the Sialk and Hissar infantry had made contact with the outer defences. Arrows swarmed the air. Weasel Clan horsewarriors battled on two sides – against Tithansi lancers at the front, and pike-wielding infantry on their right flank. They were struggling to withdraw. Holding the earthen defences were Captain Lull's marines, Wickan archers and a scattering of auxiliary units. They were yielding the first breastworks to the hardened infantry. The horde had begun to boil on the slopes beyond.

To the north the two legions of Tithansi archers were rushing forward for the cover of the leadwoods. From there they would start killing cattle. There was no-one to challenge them.

'And so it shatters,' Duiker said.

'You're as bad as Reloe. Sir.'

'What do you mean?'

'Too quick to count us out. This isn't our first engagement.'

Faint shrieks drifted across from the leadwoods. Duiker squinted through the dust. The Tithansi archers were screaming, thrashing about, vanishing from sight in the high marsh grasses beneath the skeletal trees. 'What in Hood's name is happening to those men?'

'An old, thirsty spirit, sir. Sormo promised it a day of warm blood. One last day. Before it dies or ceases or whatever it is spirits do when they go.'

The archers had routed, their panicked flight taking them back to the slope beneath the tel.

'There go the last of them,' List said.

For a moment Duiker thought the corporal referred to the Tithansi archers, then he realized, with a start, that the cattle were gone. He wheeled to face the ford, cursing at the tumbling clouds of dust. 'Too fast,' he muttered.

The refugees had begun moving, streamers of humanity flowing across the old oxbow channel and onto the island. There was no semblance of order, no way to control almost thirty thousand exhausted and terrified people. And they were about to sweep over the wall where Duiker and the corporal stood.

'We should move,' List said.

The historian nodded. 'Where?'

'Uh, east?'

To where the Weasel Clan now covered the marines and other footmen as they relinquished one earthen rampart after another, the soldiers falling back so quickly that they would be at the slatted bridge in minutes. *And then? Up against* this *mob of shrieking refugees. Oh, Hood! What now?*

List seemed to read his mind. 'They'll hold at the bridge,' he asserted. 'They have to. Come on!'

Their flight took them across the front of the leading edge of the refugees. The awakened land trembled beneath them, steam rising with a reek like muddy sweat. Here and there along the east edge of the island, the ground bulged and split open. Duiker's headlong sprint faltered. Shapes were clambering from the broken earth, skeletal beneath arcane, pitted and encrusted bronze armour, battered helms with antlers on their heads and long red-stained hair hanging in matted tufts down past their shoulders. The sound that came from them chilled Duiker's soul. *Laughter, Joyous laughter. Hood, are you twisting in affronted rage right now?*

'Nil,' List gasped. 'Nether's twin – that boy over there. Sormo said that this place has seen battle before – said this oxbow island wasn't natural ... oh, Queen of Dreams, yet another Wickan nightmare!'

The ancient warriors, voicing blood-curdling glee, were now breaking free of the earth all along the eastern end of the island. On Duiker's right and behind him, refugees screamed with terror, their headlong flight staggering to a halt as the horrific creatures rose among them.

The Weasel Clan and the footmen had contracted to a solid line this side of the bridge and channel. That line twitched and shuffled as the raised warriors pushed through their ranks, single-edged swords rising – the weapons almost shapeless beneath mineral accretions – as they marched into the milling mass of the Hissar and Sialk infantry. The laughter had become singing, a guttural battle chant.

Duiker and List found themselves in a cleared area pocked with smouldering, broken earth, the refugees behind them withdrawing as they pushed towards the ford, the rearguard before them finally able to draw breath as the undead warriors waded into their foe.

The boy Nil, Nether's twin, rode a huge roan horse, wheeling back and forth along the line, in one hand a feather-bedecked, knobbed club of some sort which he waved over his head. The undead warriors that passed near him bellowed and shook their weapons in salute – or gratitude. Like them, the boy was laughing.

Reloe's veteran infantry broke before the onslaught and fell back to collide with the horde that had now checked its own advance.

'How can this be?' Duiker asked. 'Hood's Warren – this is necromantic, not—'

'Maybe they're not true undead,' List suggested. 'Maybe the island's spirit simply uses them—'

The historian shook his head. 'Not entirely. Hear that laughter – that song – do you hear the language? These warriors have had their souls awakened. Those souls must have remained, held by the spirit, never released to Hood. We'll pay for this, Corporal. Every one of us.'

Other figures were emerging from the ground on all sides: women, children, dogs. Many of the dogs still wore leather harnesses, still dragged the remnants of travois. The women held their children to their bosoms, gripping the bone hafts of wide-bladed bronze knives they had plunged into those children. An ancient, final tragedy in frozen tableau, as a whole tribe faced slaughter at the hands of some unknown foe – *how many thousands of years ago did this happen, how long have these trapped souls held on to this horrifying, heart-rending moment? And now? Are they doomed to repeat that eternal anguish?* 'Hood bless these,' Duiker whispered, 'please. Take them. Take them now.'

The women were locked into that fatal pattern. He watched them thrusting daggers home, watched the children jerk and writhe, listened to their short-lived wails. He watched as the women then fell, heads crumpling to unseen weapons – to memories only they could see ... and feel. The remorseless executions went on, and on.

Nil had ceased his frenzied ride and now guided his roan at a walk towards the ghastly scene. The boy was sickly pale beneath his tanned skin. Something whispered in Duiker's mind that the young warlock was seeing more than anyone else – rather, anyone else who was alive. The boy's head moved, tracking ghost-killers. He flinched at every death-dealing blow.

The historian, his legs as awkward as wooden crutches beneath him, stumbled towards the boy. He reached up and took the reins from the

warlock's motionless hands. 'Nil,' he said quietly. 'What do you see?'

The boy blinked, then slowly looked down to meet Duiker's gaze. 'What?'

'You can see. Who kills them?'

'Who?' He ran a trembling hand across his brow. 'Kin. The clan split, two rivals for the Antlered Chair. Kin, Historian. Cousins, brothers, uncles...'

Duiker felt something breaking inside him at Nil's words. Half-formed expectations, held by desperate need, had insisted that the killers were ... Jaghut, Forkrul Assail, K'Chain Che'Malle ... *someone . . . someone other.* 'No,' he said.

Nil's eyes, young yet ancient, held his as the warlock nodded. 'Kin. This has been mirrored. Among the Wick. A generation ago. Mirrored.'

'But no longer.' *Please.*

'No longer.' Nil managed a small wry smile. 'The Emperor, as our enemy, united us. By laughing at our small battles, our pointless feuds. Laughing and more: sneering. He shamed us with contempt, Historian. When he met with Coltaine, our alliance was already breaking apart. Kellanved mocked. He said he need only sit back and watch to see the end of our rebellion. With his words he branded our souls. With his words and his offer of unity he bestowed on us wisdom. With his words we knelt before him in true gratitude, accepted what he offered us and gave him our loyalty. You once wondered how the Emperor won our hearts. Now you know.'

The enemy resolve stiffened as the corroded weapons of the ancient warriors shattered and snapped against modern iron. Skeletal, desiccated bodies proved as unequal to the task. Pieces flew, figures stumbled, then fell, too broken to rise again.

'Must they live through their defeat a second time?' Duiker asked.

Nil shrugged. 'They purchased us a spell to breathe, to steady ourselves. Remember, Historian, had these warriors won the first time, they would have done to their victims what was done to their own families.' The child warlock slowly shook his head. 'There is little good in people. Little good.'

The sentiment jarred coming from one so young. *Some old man's voice comes from the boy, remember that.* 'Yet it can be found,' Duiker countered. 'All the more precious for its rarity.'

Nil reclaimed the reins. 'You'll find none here, Historian,' he said, his voice as hard as the words. 'We are known by our madness – this, the island's ancient spirit shows us. The memories that survive are all horror, our deeds so dark as to sear the land itself. Keep your eyes open,' he added, spinning his mount around to face the battle that had resumed at the slatted bridge, 'we're not finished yet.'

Duiker said nothing, watching the child warlock ride towards the line.

Impossibly to the historian's mind, the path before the refugees suddenly cleared, and they began crossing. He looked into the sky. The sun edged towards noon. Somehow, it had felt much later. He glared back at the dust-shrouded river – the crossing would be a terrible thing, the deep water perilous on both sides, the screaming of children, the old men and women, too weak to manage, slipping away in the current, vanishing beneath the surface. Dust and horror, the swirling water absorbing every echo.

Crow Clan horsewarriors rode around the edges of the milling, fearful thousands, as if tending a vast herd of mindless beasts. With long blunted poles, they kept the crowds from spreading and spilling outward, swinging them down to crack shins and knees, stabbing at faces. The refugees flinched back en masse wherever they rode.

'Historian,' List said at his side. 'We should find horses.'

Duiker shook his head. 'Not yet. This rearguard defence is now the heart of the battle – I'm not leaving. I have to witness it—'

'Understood, sir. But when they do withdraw, they'll be collected by the Wickans, an extra soldier for each rider. Coltaine and the rest of his clan should be joining them soon. They'll hold this side of the ford to allow the rearguard to cross. If we don't want our heads on spears, sir, we'd better find some horses.'

After a moment Duiker nodded. 'Do it, then.'

'Yes, sir.' The young soldier headed off.

The defensive line along the old channel writhed like a serpent. The enemy's regular infantry, having destroyed the last of the skeletal warriors, now pushed hard. Bolstered by the steady nerves and efficient brutality of the marines among them, the auxiliaries continued to drive the regulars back. The Weasel Clan horsewarriors had split into smaller troops, mixed bowmen and lancers. Wherever the line seemed about to buckle, they rode to support.

The warlock Nil commanded them, his shouted orders piercing through the clash and roar of battle. He seemed able to sense weakening elements before such faltering was physically reflected. His magically enhanced sense of timing was all that kept the line from collapsing.

To the north Kamist Reloe had finally begun moving with his elite force. Archers to the fore, the heavy infantry marched in ranks behind the Tithansi screen. They would not challenge the leadwoods and marsh, however, slowly wheeling eastward to skirt its deadly edge.

The peasant army now pushed behind the Sialk and Hissar infantry, the weight of tens of thousands building to an unstoppable tide.

Duiker looked anxiously to the south. Where was Coltaine? Dust and now smoke rose from the hills. The village of L'enbarl was burning, and the battle still raged – if Coltaine and the bulk of his Crow Clan could not disengage soon, they would be trapped on this side of the river. The historian noted he was not alone in his trepid attention. Nil's head jerked in that direction again and again. Then Duiker finally realized that the young warlock was in communication with his fellow warlocks – the ones in Coltaine's company. Control. . . *and the illusion of control.*

List rode up, leading Duiker's own mare. The corporal did not dismount as he passed the reins over. The historian swung himself into the familiar worn saddle, whispering a word of gratitude to the Wickan elders who had so lovingly attended to his horse. The animal was fit and full of life. *Now if they could manage the same with me.*

The rearguard began yielding ground once again, relinquishing the old channel as the enemy pushed relentlessly. Kamist Reloe's heavy infantry was perhaps five minutes from striking the north flank.

'This isn't looking good,' Duiker said.

Corporal List adjusted his helmet strap and said nothing, but the historian saw the tremble in the lad's hands.

Weasel Clan riders were streaming from the line now, burdened with wounded soldiers. They rode past Duiker's position, blood- and dust-streaked wraiths, their tattooed faces and bodies making them look demonic. The historian's gaze followed them as they headed towards the seething refugees. The mass of civilians on this side of the river had shrunk considerably since he last looked. *Too fast. They must have panicked at the ford. Thousands drowning in the deeps. A disaster.*

'We should withdraw now, sir,' List said.

The rearguard was crumbling, the stream of wounded growing, the horses thundering past were each carrying two, sometimes three fighters. The line contracted, the flanking edges drawing in towards the centre. In minutes they would be encircled. *Then slaughtered.* He saw Captain Lull bellowing commands to form a square. Soldiers still on their feet were pitifully few.

In one of those mysterious vagaries of battle, the Sialk and Hissar infantry paused, there on the threshold of complete victory. Off to one side the heavy infantry arrived, two rectangular blocks fifty soldiers across and twenty deep, bands of archers now in between those blocks and to either side. For a moment, stillness and silence rose like a barrier in the open space between the two forces.

The Weasel Clan continued plucking footmen. Lull's square was disintegrating from this side, becoming a three-sided, hollow ring.

'The last of the refugees are in the water,' Lull said, his breath coming faster than before, his hands twitching as they gripped the reins. 'We have to ride—'

'Where in Hood's name is Coltaine?' Duiker demanded.

From a dozen paces away Nil reined in amidst a rolling cloud of dust. 'We wait no longer! Thus the Fist commands! Ride, Historian!'

Horsemen gathered the last of Lull's troops even as, with an air-trembling roar, the enemy ranks rushed in. Avenues opened between the infantry, releasing at last the frenzied rage of the peasant horde.

'Sir!' List's cry was a frantic plea.

Cursing, Duiker wheeled his mount and drove his heels into the mare's flanks. They bolted after the Wickan horsewarriors.

Now unleashed, the horde poured in pursuit, eager to claim this side of the ford. The Sialk and Hissar infantry and Kamist's heavy infantry let them go unescorted, maintaining their discipline.

Wickan riders were plunging into the dust clouds ahead at full gallop. At that speed they would clash with the rear elements of the refugees who were still in the midst of crossing. Then, when the peasant army hit, the river would run red. Duiker reined in, shouting to List. The corporal glanced back, his expression one of shock. He sawed the reins, his horse skidding and slipping on the muddy slope.

'Historian!'

'We ride south, along the bank!' Duiker yelled. 'We swim the horses – ahead lies chaos and death!'

List was fiercely shaking his head in denial.

Without awaiting a reply, the historian swung his mount to the left. If they rode hard, they would clear the island before the horde reached the ford's bank. He drove his heels into the mare's flanks. The animal lunged forward.

'Historian!'

'Ride or die, damn you!'

A hundred paces along the shore was the sunken mouth of the old oxbow, a thick, verdant swath of cattails miraculously untouched by the day's events. Beyond it rose the hills shielding L'enbarl. *If Coltaine extricates*

himself, he'll do the smart thing – straight into the river. Even if the current carries them down to the ford itself, they'll have a head start. A few hundred drowned is a damned sight better than three thousand slaughtered trying to retake this side of the ford.

As if to defy his every thought, Wickan horsewarriors appeared, sweeping down the opposite slope. Coltaine rode at the head, his black feather cape a single splayed wing behind him. Lances were lowered, flanking bowmen nocking arrows on the fly. The charge was coming directly for Duiker.

The historian, half disbelieving, dragged the mare around into a staggering about-face. 'Oh Hood, might as well join this doomed charge!' He saw List doing the same, the lad's face white as death beneath his dusty helm.

They would strike the peasant army's flank like a knife blade plunging into the side of a whale. And *about as effective. Suicide! Even if we make the ford, we'll flounder. Horses will fall, men will drown, and the peasants will descend to reap slaughter.* Still they rode on. Moments before contact, he saw Weasel Clan horsewarriors reappear from the dust cloud. *Counterattack. More madness!*

Crow riders swept to either side of the historian, the momentum of their charge at its peak. Duiker turned his head at Coltaine's fierce, joyous shout.

Arrows whizzed past. The flank of the peasant army contracted, flinched back. When the Wickans struck, it was into a solidly packed mass of humanity. Yet, at the last moment, the Crow Clan riders wheeled towards the river and rode alongside the flank. *Not a knife plunge. A sabre slash.*

Peasants died. Others fell in their frantic retreat and were trampled by the frenzied horses. The entire flank bloomed red as the savage Wickan blades travelled its length.

The peasants holding the ford's landing were crumpling beneath the Weasel Clan's counterattack. Then the lead riders of the Crow Clan struck the north edge.

The peasant line seemed to melt away before Duiker's eyes. He now rode with the Crow Clan, horse shoulders hammering his legs to either side. Blood rained from raised weapons, spattering his face and hands. Ahead, the Weasel Clan's riders parted, covering their kin's wild charge straight into the clouds of dust.

Now the mayhem truly begins. For all the glory of Coltaine's charge, ahead lay the river. Wounded soldiers, refugees and Hood knew what else.

The historian snatched what he felt would be his last breath a moment before plunging into the sunlit dust.

His mare splashed water, yet barely slowed. The way before him stretched clear, a swirling, strangely choppy sweep of muddy water. Other riders were barely visible farther ahead, their horses at full gallop. Duiker could feel the unyielding, solid impact his mare's hooves made as they rode on. There was not four and a half feet of river beneath them, but half that. And the hooves struck stone, not mud. He did not understand.

Corporal List appeared alongside the historian, as well as a straggling squad of Crow horsewarriors. One of the Wickans grinned. 'Coltaine's road – his warriors fly like ghosts across the river!'

Various comments the night before returned to Duiker. *Tumlit – that nobleman's observations. Reinforced wagons apparently overloaded with wounded. Stone cutters and Engineers. The wagons crossing first and taking most of the night to do so. The wounded were laid atop the stone blocks. The damned Engineers had built a road!*

It still seemed impossible, yet the evidence was there beneath him as he rode. Poles had been raised to either side, strung with rope made from Tithansi hair to mark the edges. A little over ten feet wide – what was surrendered in width was made up for with the relative swiftness of crossing the more than four hundred paces to the other side. The ford's depth was no more than two and a third feet now, and had clearly proved manageable for both livestock and refugees.

The dust thinned ahead and the historian realized they were approaching the river's west side. The thunder of sorcery reached him. *This battle's far*

from over. We've temporarily outrun one army, only to charge headlong into another. All this, just to get crushed between two rocks?

They reached the shallows and a moment later rode upslope twenty strides, emerging from the last drifting shrouds of dust.

Duiker shouted in alarm, he and his companions frantically sawing their reins. Directly in front of them was a squad of soldiers – Engineers – who had been running at full speed towards the ford's landing. The sappers now scattered with foul curses, ducking and dodging around the stumbling, skidding horses. One, a solid, mountainous man with a sun-burnished, smooth-shaven, flat face, flung his battered helm off, revealing a bald pate, and threw the iron skullcap at the nearest Wickan rider – missing the warrior's head by scant inches. 'Clear out, you flyblown piles of gizzards! We got work to do!'

'Yeah!' another growled, limping in circles after a hoof had landed full on a foot. 'Go fight or something! We got a plug to pull!'

Ignoring their demands, Duiker spun the mare around to face the ford. Whatever sorcery had held the dust over the water was now gone. The clouds had already drifted fifty paces downstream. And Coltaine's Road was a mass of armed, screaming peasants.

The second sapper who'd spoken now scrambled to a shallow pit overlooking the muddy landing.

'Hold off there, Cuttle!' the big man commanded, his eyes on the surging thousands – the lead elements now in the middle of the crossing. The man anchored his huge hands on his hips, glowering and seemingly unaware of the rapt attention his squad held on him, as well as that from Duiker, List and the half-dozen Wickan horsemen. 'Got to maximize,' the man rumbled. 'Bastard Wickans ain't the only ones who know about timing.'

The horde's vanguard, glittering with weapons, looking like the iron-fanged maw of a giant snake, was three-quarters across. The historian could make out individual faces, the expressions of fear and murderous intent that make up the faces of battle. A glance behind him showed rising columns of smoke and the flash of sorcery, concentrated on the right flank of the

Seventh's defensive positions. The faint screeching Semk war cry drifted from that flank, a sound like claws scraping taut skin. A fierce melee was underway at the first earthworks.

'All right, Cuttle,' the big man drawled. 'Yank the hair.'

Duiker swung back to see the sapper in the pit raise both hands, gripping a long, black cord that trailed down into the water. Cuttle's dirt-smeared face twisted into a fierce grimace, his eyes squeezing shut. Then he pulled. The cord went slack.

Nothing happened.

The historian chanced to look the big man's way. He had a finger stuck in each ear, though his eyes remained open and fixed on the river. Realization struck Duiker even as List cried, *'Sir!'*

The ground seemed to drop an inch under them. The water on the ford rose up, humped, blurred, the hump seeming to roll with lightning swiftness down the submerged road's length. The peasants on the river simply vanished. Then reappeared a heartbeat later – even as the concussion struck everyone on shore with a wind like a god's fist – in blossoms of red and pink and yellow, fragments of flesh and bone, limbs, hair, tufts of cloth, all lifting higher and higher as the water exploded up and out in a muddy, ghastly mist.

Duiker's mare backstepped, head tossing. The sound had been deafening. The world shivered on all sides. A Wickan rider had tumbled from his saddle and now writhed on the ground, hands held to his ears.

The river began to fall back, horridly churned with bodies and pieces of bodies, steam twisting away on sudden gusts of wind. The giant snake's head was gone. Obliterated. As was another third of its length – all who had been in the water were gone.

Though he now stood close by, the big man's words sounded faint and distant to Duiker's ringing ears as he said, 'Fifty-five cussers – what the Seventh's been hoarding for years. That ford's now a trench. Ha.' Then his

satisfied expression drained away. 'Hood's toes, we're back to digging with shovels.'

A hand plucked the historian's sleeve. List leaned close and whispered, 'Where to now, sir?'

The historian looked downstream at the twisting eddies, red-stained and full of human flotsam. For a moment he could not comprehend the corporal's question. *Where to? Nowhere* that's *good, no place where giving pause to slaughter will yield some' thing other than despair.*

'Sir?'

'To the melee, Corporal. We see this through.'

The swift arrival of Coltaine and his Crow horsewarriors to strike at the west flank of the Tithansi lancers on this side of the river had turned the tide of battle. As they rode towards the engagement at the earthworks, Duiker and List could see the Tithansi crumbling, exposing the Semk footmen to the mounted Wickan bowmen. Arrows raked through the wild-haired Semk fighters.

At the centre stood the bulk of the Seventh's infantry, holding at bay the frenzied efforts of the Semk, while a hundred paces to the north, the Guran heavy infantry still waited to close with the hated Malazans. Their commander was evidently having second thoughts. Kamist Reloe and his army were trapped – for this battle at least – on the other side of the river. Apart from the battered rearguard marines and the Weasel Clan, Coltaine's force was relatively intact.

Five hundred paces farther west, out on a broad, stony plain, the Weasel Clan pursued remnants of Guran cavalry.

Duiker saw a knot of colour amidst the Seventh, gold and red – Baria Setral and his Red Blades, in the heart of the fighting. The Semk seemed eager to close on the Malazan lapdogs, and were paying in blood for their desire. Nonetheless, Setral's troop looked at no more than half strength – less than twenty men.

'I want to get closer,' Duiker announced.

'Yes, sir,' List said. He pointed. 'That rise there – it'll put us in bow range though, sir.'

'I'll take that risk.'

They rode towards the Seventh. The company standard stood solitary and dust-streaked on a low hill just behind the line. Three grey-haired veterans guarded it – Semk bodies strewn on the slope indicated that the hill had been hotly contested earlier in the day. The veterans had been in the fight, and all bore minor wounds.

As the historian and the corporal rode to their position, Duiker saw that the three men crouched around a fallen comrade. Tears had clawed crooked trails down their dusty cheeks. Arriving, the historian slowly dismounted.

'You've a story here, soldiers,' he said, pitching his voice low to reach through the clangour and shouts of the struggle thirty paces north of them.

One of the veterans glanced up, squinting. 'The old Emperor's historian, by Hood's grin! Saw you in Falar, or maybe the Wickan Plains—'

'Both. The standard was challenged, I see. You lost a friend in defending it.'

The man blinked, then glanced around until he focused on the Seventh's standard. The pikeshaft leaned to one side, its tattered banner bleached into ghost colours by the sun. 'Hood's breath,' the man growled. 'Think we'd fight to save a piece of cloth on a pole?' He gestured at the body his friends knelt around. 'Nordo took two arrows. We held off a squad of Semk so he could die in his own time. Those bastard tribesmen snatch wounded enemies and keep 'em alive so's they can torture 'em. Nordo wasn't gettin' none of that.'

Duiker was silent for a long moment. 'Is that how you want the tale told, soldier?'

The man squinted some more, then he nodded. 'Just like that, Historian. We ain't just a Malazan army any more. We're Coltaine's.'

'But he's a Fist.'

'He's a cold-blooded lizard.' The man then grinned. 'But he's all ours.'

Smiling, Duiker twisted in his saddle and studied the battle at the line. Some threshold of spirit had been crossed. The Semk were broken. Dying by the score with three legions of supposed allies sitting motionless on the slopes behind them, they had carved out the last of zeal in the holy cause – at least for this engagement. There would be curses and hot accusations in the enemy camps this coming night, Duiker knew. *Good, let them crack apart of their own accord.*

Once again, it was not to be the Whirlwind's day.

Coltaine did not let his victorious army rest as the afternoon's light sank in the earth. New fortifications were raised, others reinforced. Trenches were dug, pickets established. The refugees were led out onto the stony plain west of the ford, their tents arranged in blocks with wide avenues in between. Wagons loaded with wounded soldiers were moved into those avenues, and the cutters and healers set to work.

The livestock were driven south, to the grassy slopes of the Barl Hills – a weathered, humped range of bleached rock and twisted jackpine. Drovers supported by riders of the Foolish Dog Clan guarded the herds.

In the Fist's command tent, as the sun dropped beneath the horizon, Coltaine held a debriefing.

Duiker, with the now ever-present Corporal List standing at his shoulder, sat wearily in a camp chair, listening to the commanders make their reports with a dismay that slowly numbed. Lull had lost fully half his marines, and the auxiliaries that had supported him had fared even worse. The Weasel Clan had been mauled during the withdrawal – a shortage of horses was now their main concern. From the Seventh, captains Chenned and Sulmar recounted a seemingly endless litany of wounded and dead. It seemed that their officers and squad sergeants, in particular, had taken heavy losses. The pressure against the defensive line had been enormous, especially early in the day – before support had arrived in the form of the Red Blades and the Foolish Dog Clan. The tale of Baria Setral and his company's fall rode

many a breath. They had fought with demonic ferocity, holding the front ranks, purchasing with their lives a crucial period in which the infantry was able to regroup. The Red Blades had shown valour, enough to earn comment from Coltaine himself.

Sormo had lost two of his warlock children in the struggle against the Semk wizard-priests, although both Nil and Nether survived. 'We were lucky,' he said after reporting the deaths in a cool, dispassionate tone. 'The Semk god is a vicious Ascendant. It uses the wizards to channel its rage, without regard for their mortal flesh. Those unable to withstand their god's power simply disintegrated.'

'That'll cut their numbers down,' Lull said with a grunt.

'The god simply chooses more,' Sormo said. More and more he had begun to look like an old man, even in his gestures. Duiker watched the youth close his eyes and press his knuckles against them. 'More extreme measures must be taken.'

The others were silent, until Chenned gave voice to everyone's uncertainty. 'What does that mean, Warlock?'

Bult said, 'Words carried on breath can be heard ... by a vengeful, paranoid god. If no alternative exists, Sormo, then proceed.'

The warlock slowly nodded.

After a moment Bult sighed loudly, pausing to drink from a bladder before speaking. 'Kamist Reloe is heading north. He'll cross at the river mouth – Sekala town has a stone bridge. But to do so means he loses ten, maybe eleven days.'

'The Guran infantry will stay with us,' Sulmar said. 'As will the Semk. They need not stand toe to toe to do us damage. Exhaustion will claim us before much longer.'

Bult's wide mouth pressed into a straight line. 'Coltaine has proclaimed tomorrow a day of rest. Cattle will be slaughtered, the enemy's dead horses butchered and cooked. Weapons and armour repaired.'

Duiker lifted his head. 'Do we still march for Ubaryd?'

No-one answered.

The historian studied the commanders. He saw nothing hopeful in their faces. 'The city has fallen.'

'So claimed a Tithansi warleader,' Lull said. 'He had nothing to lose in telling us since he was dying anyway. Nether said he spoke truth. The Malazan fleet has fled Ubaryd. Even now tens of thousands of refugees are being driven northeast.'

'More squalling nobles to perch on Coltaine's lap,' Chenned said with a sneer.

'This is impossible,' Duiker said. 'If we cannot go to Ubaryd, what other city lies open to us?'

'There is but one,' Bult said. 'Aren.'

Duiker sat straight. 'Madness! Two hundred leagues!'

'And another third, to be precise,' Lull said, baring his teeth.

'Is Pormqual counterattacking? Is he marching north to meet us halfway? Is he even aware that we exist?'

Bult's gaze held steady on the historian. 'Aware? I would think so, Historian. Will he march out from Aren? Counterattack?' The veteran shrugged.

'I saw a company of Engineers on my way here,' Lull said. 'They were weeping, one and all.'

Chenned asked, 'Why? Is their invisible commander lying on the bottom of the Sekala with a mouthful of mud?'

Lull shook his head. 'They're out of cussers now. Just a crate or two of sharpers and burners. You'd think every one of their mothers had just croaked.'

Coltaine finally spoke. 'They did well.'

Bult nodded. 'Aye. Wish I'd been there to see the road go up.'

'We were,' Duiker said. 'Victory tastes sweetest in the absence of haunting memories, Bult. Savour it.'

In his tent, Duiker awoke to a soft, small hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes to darkness.

'Historian,' a voice said.

'Nether? What hour is this? How long have I slept?'

'Perhaps two,' she answered. 'Coltaine commands you to come with me. Now.'

Duiker sat up. He'd been too tired to do more than simply lay his bedroll down on the floor. The blankets were sodden with sweat and condensation. He shivered with chill. 'What has happened?' he asked.

'Nothing, yet. You are to witness. Quickly now, Historian. We have little time.'

He stepped outside to a camp quietly moaning in the deepest hour of darkness before the arrival of false dawn. Thousands of voices made the dreadful, gelid sound. Wounds troubling exhausted sleep, the soft cries of soldiers beyond the arts of the healers and cutters, the lowing of livestock, shifting hooves underscoring the chorus in a restless, rumbling beat. Somewhere out on the plain north of them rose faint wailing, wives and mothers grieving the dead.

As he followed Nether's spry, wool-cloaked form down the twisting lanes of the Wickan encampment, the historian was drawn into sorrow-laden thoughts. The dead were gone through Hood's Gate. The living were left with the pain of their passage. Duiker had seen many peoples as Imperial Historian, yet among them not one in his recollection did not possess a ritual of grief. *For all our personal gods, Hood alone embraces us all, in a thousand guises. When the breath from his gates brushes close, we ever give voice to drive back that eternal silence. Tonight, we hear the Semk. And the*

Tithansi. Uncluttered rituals. Who needs temples and priests to chain and guide the expression of loss and dismay – when all is sacred?

'Nether, why do the Wickans not grieve this night?'

She half turned as she continued walking. 'Coltaine forbids it.'

'Why?'

'For that answer you must ask him. We have not mourned our losses since this journey began.'

Duiker was silent for a long moment, then he said, 'And how do you and the others in the three clans feel about that, Nether?'

'Coltaine commands. We obey.'

They came to the edge of the Wickan encampment. Beyond the last tent stretched a flat killing strip, perhaps twenty paces wide, then the freshly raised wicker walls of the pickets, with their long bamboo spikes thrust through them, the points outward and at the height of a horse's chest. Mounted warriors of the Weasel Clan patrolled along them, eyes on the dark, stone-studded plain beyond.

In the killing strip stood two figures, one tall, the other short, both lean as spectres. Nether led Duiker up to them

Sormo. Nil. 'Are you,' the historian asked the tall warlock, 'all that remain? You told Coltaine you lost but two yesterday.'

Sormo E'nath nodded. 'The others rest their young flesh. A dozen horsewives tend to the mounts and a handful of healers tend to wounded soldiers. We three are the strongest, thus we are here.' The warlock stepped forward. There was a febrile air about him, and in his voice was a tone that asked for something more than the historian could give. 'Duiker, whose eyes met mine across the Whirlwind ghosts in the trader camp, listen to my words. You will hear the fear – every solemn chime. You are no stranger to that dark chorus. Know, then, that this night I had doubts.'

'Warlock,' Duiker said quietly, as Nether stepped forward to take position on Sormo's right – turning so that all three now faced the historian – 'what

is happening here?'

In answer Sormo E'nath raised his hands.

The scene shifted around them. He saw moraines and scree slopes rising behind the three warlocks, the dark sky seeming to throb its blackness overhead. The ground was wet and cold beneath Duiker's moccasins. He looked down to see glittering sheets of brittle ice covering puddles of muddy water. The crazed patterns in the ice reflected myriad colours from a sourceless light.

A breath of cold wind made him turn around. A guttural bark of surprise was loosed from his throat. The historian stepped back, his being filling with horror. Rotten, blood-smeared ice formed a shattered cliff before him, the tumbled, jagged blocks at its foot less than ten paces away. The cliff rose, sloping back until the streaked face vanished within mists.

The ice was full of bodies, human-shaped figures, twisted and flesh-torn. Organs and entrails were spilled out at the base as if from a giant abattoir. Slowly melting chunks of blood-soaked ice created a lake from which the body parts jutted or rose in islands humped and slick.

Exposed flesh had begun to putrefy into misshapen gelatinous mounds, through which bones could faintly be seen.

Sormo spoke behind him. 'He is within it, but close.'

'Who?'

'The Semk god. An Ascendant from long ago. Unable to challenge the sorcery, he was devoured with the others. Yet he did not die. Can you feel his anger, Historian?'

'I think I'm beyond feeling. What sorcery did this?'

'Jaghut. To stem the tides of invading humans, they raised ice. Sometimes swiftly, sometimes slowly, as their strategy dictated. In places it swallowed entire continents, obliterating all that once stood upon them. Forkrul Assail civilizations, the vast mechanisms and edifices of the K'Chain Che'Malle, and of course the squalid huts of those who would one day inherit the

world. The highest of Omtose Phellack, these rituals never die, Historian. They rise, subside, and rise yet again. Even now, one is born anew on a distant land, and those rivers of ice fill my dreams, for they are destined to create vast upheaval, and death in numbers unimaginable.'

Sormo's words held a timbre of antiquity, the remorseless cold of ages folding over one another, again and again, until it seemed to Duiker that every rock, every cliff, every mountain moved in eternal motion, like mindless leviathans. Shivers raced the blood in his veins until he trembled uncontrollably.

'Think of all such ice holds,' Sormo went on. 'Looters of tombs find riches, but wise hunters of power seek ... ice.'

Nether spoke. 'They have begun assembling.'

Duiker finally turned away from the ravaged, flesh-marred ice. Shapeless swirls and pulses of energy now surrounded the three warlocks. Some waxed bright and energetic, while others blossomed faintly in fitful rhythm.

'The spirits of the land,' Sormo said.

Nil fidgeted in his robes, as if barely restraining the desire to dance. A dark smile showed on his child-face. 'The flesh of an Ascendant holds much power. They all hunger for a piece. With this gift we bring them, further service is bound.'

'Historian.' Sormo stepped closer, reaching out one thin hand until it rested on Duiker's shoulder. 'How thin is this slice of mercy? All that anger ... brought to an end. Torn apart, each fragment consumed. Not death, but a kind of dissipation—'

'And what of the Semk wizard-priests?'

The warlock winced. 'Knowledge, and with it great pain. We must carve the heart from the Semk. Yet that heart is worse than stone. How it uses the mortal flesh . . .' He shook his head. 'Coltaine commands.'

'You obey.'

Sormo nodded.

Duiker said nothing for a dozen heartbeats, then he sighed. 'I have heard your doubts, Warlock.'

Sormo's expression showed an almost fierce relief. 'Cover your eyes, then, Historian. This will be .. . messy.'

Behind Duiker, the ice erupted with an explosive roar. Cold crimson rain struck the historian in a rolling wall, staggering him.

A savage shriek sounded behind him.

The spirits of the land bolted forward, spinning and tumbling past Duiker. He whirled in time to see a figure – flesh rotted black, arms long as an ape's – clawing its way out of the dirty, steaming slush.

The spirits reached it, swarming over the figure. It managed a single, piercing shriek before it was torn to pieces.

The eastern horizon was a streak of red when they returned to the killing strip. The camp was already awakening, the demands of existence pressing once more upon ragged, weary souls. Wagon-mounted forges were being stoked, fresh hides scraped, leather stretched and punched or boiled in huge blackened pots. Despite a lifetime spent in cities, the Malazan refugees were learning to carry their city with them – or at least those meagre remnants vital to survival.

Duiker and the three warlocks were sodden with old blood and clinging fragments of flesh. Their reappearance on the plain was enough to announce their success and the Wickans raised a wail that ran through each clan's encampment, the sound as much sorrowful as triumphant, a fitting dirge to announce the fall of a god.

From the distant Semk camps to the north, the rituals of mourning had fallen off, leaving naught but ominous silence.

Dew steamed from the earth, and the historian could feel – as he crossed the killing strip back towards the Wickan encampment – a darker

reverberation to the power of the spirits of the land. The three warlocks parted from him as they approached the camp's edge.

The reverberating power found a voice only moments later, as every dog in the vast camp began howling. The cries were strangely lifeless and cold as iron, filling the air like a promise.

Duiker slowed his walk. A *promise.* An *age of devouring ice—*

'Historian!'

He looked up to see three men approach. He recognized two of them, Nethpara and Tumlit. The fellow nobleman accompanying them was short and round, burdened beneath a gold-brocaded cloak that would have looked imposing on a man twice his height and half his girth. As it was, the effect held more pathos than anything else.

Nethpara was breathless as he hurried up, his slack folds of flesh quivering and mud-spattered. 'Imperial Historian Duiker, we wish to speak with you.'

Lack of sleep – and a host of other things – had drawn Duiker's tolerance short, but he managed to keep his tone calm. 'I suggest another time—'

'Quite impossible!' snapped the third nobleman. 'The Council is not to be brushed off yet again. Coltaine holds the sword and so may keep us at bay with his barbaric indifference, but we will have our petition delivered one way or the other!'

Duiker blinked at the man.

Tumlit cleared his throat apologetically and dabbed his watering eyes. 'Historian, permit me to introduce the Highborn Lenestro, recent resident of Sialk—'

'No mere resident!' Lenestro squealed. 'Sole representative of the Kanese family of the same name, in all Seven Cities. Factor in the largest trade enterprise exporting the finest tanned camel hide. I am chief within the Guild, granted the honour of First Potency in Sialk. More than one Fist has

bowed before me, yet here I stand, reduced to demanding audience with a foul-bespattered scholar—'

'Lenestro, please!' Tumlit said in exasperation. 'You do your cause little good!'

'Slapped across the face by a lard-smeared savage the Empress should have had spiked on a wall years ago! I warrant she will regret her mercy when news of this horror reaches her!'

'Which horror would that be, Lenestro?' Duiker quietly asked.

The question made Lenestro gape and sputter, his face reddening.

Nethpara elected to answer. 'Historian, Coltaine conscripted our servants. It was not even a request. His Wickan dogs simply collected them – indeed, when one of our honoured colleagues protested, he was struck upon his person and knocked to the ground. Have our servants been returned? They have not. Are they even alive? What horrible suicide stand was left to them? We have no answers, Historian.'

'Your concern is for the welfare of your servants?' Duiker asked.

'Who shall prepare our meals?' Lenestro demanded. 'Mend our clothes and raise our tents and heat the water for our baths? This is an outrage!'

'Their welfare is uppermost in *my* mind,' Tumlit said, offering a sad smile.

Duiker believed the man. 'I shall enquire on your behalf, then.'

'Of course you shall!' Lenestro snapped. 'Immediately.'

'When you can,' Tumlit said.

Duiker nodded, turned away.

'We are not yet done with you!' Lenestro shouted.

'We are,' Duiker heard Tumlit say.

'Someone must silence these dogs! Their howling has no end!'

Better howling than snapping at the heel. He walked on. His desire to wash himself was becoming desperate. The residue of blood and flesh had begun to dry on his clothes and on his skin. He was attracting attention as he shuffled down the aisle between the tents. Warding gestures were being made as he passed. Duiker feared he had inadvertently become a harbinger, and the fate he promised was as chilling as the soulless howls of the camp dogs.

Ahead, the morning's light bled across the sky.

Book Three



Chain of Dogs

When the sands
Danced blind,
She emerged from the face
Of a raging goddess

Sha'ik
Bidithal

CHAPTER ELEVEN

If you seek the crumbled bones
of the T'lan Imass,
gather into one hand
the sands of Raraku

The Holy Desert
Anonymous

Kulp felt like a rat in a vast chamber crowded with ogres, caged in by shadows and but moments away from being crushed underfoot. Never before when entering the Meanas Warren had it felt so ... *fraught.*

There were strangers here, intruders, forces so inimical to the realm that the very atmosphere bridled. The essence of himself that had slipped through the fabric was reduced to a crouching, cowering creature. And yet, all he could feel was a series of fell passages, the spun wakes that marked the paths the unwelcome had taken. His senses shouted at him that – for the moment at least – he was alone, the dun sprawled-out landscape devoid of all life.

Still he trembled with terror.

Within his mind he reached back a ghostly hand, finding the tactile reassurance of the place where his body existed, the heave and slush of blood in his veins, the solid weight of flesh and bone. He sat cross-legged in the captain's cabin of the *Silanda,* watched over by a wary, restless Heboric, while the others waited on the deck, ever scanning the unbroken, remorselessly flat horizon on all sides.

They needed a way out. The entire Elder Warren they'd found themselves in was flooded, a soupy, shallow sea. The oarsmen could propel *Silanda* onward for a thousand years, until the wood rotted in their dead hands, the

shafts snapping, until the ship began to disintegrate around them, still the drum would beat and the backs would bend. And *we'd be long dead by then, nothing but mouldering dust.* To escape, they must find a means of shifting warrens.

Kulp cursed his own limitations. Had he been a practitioner of Sere, or Denul or D'riss or indeed virtually any of the other warrens accessible to humans, he would find what they needed. *But not Meanas. No seas, no rivers, not even a Hood-damned puddle.* From within his warren, Kulp was seeking to effect a passage through to the mortal world . . . and it was proving problematic.

They were bound by peculiar laws, by rules of nature that seemed to play games with the principles of cause and effect. Had they been riding a wagon, the passage through the warrens would unerringly have taken them on a dry path. The primordial elements asserted an intractable consistency across all warrens. Land to land, air to air, water to water.

Kulp had heard of High Mages who – it was rumoured – had found ways to cheat those illimitable laws, and perhaps the gods and other Ascendants possessed such knowledge as well. But they were as beyond a lowly cadre mage as the tools of an ogre's smithy to a cowering rat.

His other concern was the vastness of the task itself. Pulling a handful of companions through his warren was difficult, but manageable. But *an entire ship!* He'd hoped he would find inspiration once within the Meanas Warren, some thunderbolt delivering a simple, elegant solution. *With all the grace of poetry. Was it not Fisher Kel'Tath himself who once said poetry and sorcery were the twin edges to the knife in every man's heart? Where then are my magic cants?*

Kulp sourly admitted that he felt as stupid within Meanas as he did sitting in the captain's cabin. *The art of illusion is grace itself. There must be a way to ... to trick our way through. What's real versus what isn't is the synergy within a mortal's mind. And greater forces? Can reality itself be fooled into asserting an unreality?*

His shouting senses changed pitch. Kulp was no longer alone. The thick, turgid air of the Meanas Warren – where shadows were textured like ground glass and to slip through them was to feel a shivering ecstasy – had begun to bulge, then bow, as if something huge approached, pushing the air before it. And whatever it was, it was coming fast.

A sudden thought flooded the mage's mind. And moreover, it possessed ... *elegance. Togg's toes, can I do this? Building pressure, then vacuous wake, a certain current, a certain flow. Hood, it ain't water, but close enough.*

I hope.

He saw Heboric jump back in alarm, striking his head on a low crossbeam in the cabin. Kulp slipped back into his body and loosed a rasping gasp. 'We're about to go, Heboric. Get everyone ready!'

The old man was rubbing a stump against the back of his head. 'Ready for what, Mage?'

'Anything.'

Kulp slid back out, mentally clambering back over his anchor within Meanas.

The Unwelcome was coming, a force of such power as to make the febrile atmosphere shiver. The mage saw nearby shadows vibrate into dissolution. He felt outrage building in the air, in the loamy earth underfoot. Whatever was passing through this warren had drawn the attention of... *of whatever – Shadowthrone, the* Hounds *– or perhaps warrens truly* are *alive.* In any case, on it came, in arrogant disregard.

Kulp suddenly thought back to Sormo's ritual that had drawn them into the T'lan Imass warren outside Hissar. *Oh, Hood, Soletaken or D'ivers ...* but *such power! Who in the Abyss has such power?* He could think of but two: Anomander Rake, the Son of Darkness, and Osric. Both Soletaken, both supremely arrogant. If there were others, the tales of their activities would have reached him, he was certain. *Warriors talk about heroes. Mages talk about Ascendants.* He would have heard.

Rake was on Genabackis, and Osric was reputed to have journeyed to a continent far to the south a century or so back. *Well, maybe the cold-eyed bastard's back.* Either way, he was about to find out.

The presence arrived. His spiritual belly flat on the soft ground, Kulp craned his head skyward.

The dragon came low to the earth. It defied every image of a draconian being Kulp had ever seen. *Not Rake, not Osric.* Hugely boned, with skin like dry shark hide, its wing-span dwarfed even that of the Son of Darkness – *who has within him the blood of the draconian goddess* – and the wings had nothing of the smooth, curving grace; the bones were multi-jointed in a crazed pattern, like that of a crushed bat wing, each knobbed joint prominent beneath taut, cracked skin. The dragon's head was as wide as it was long, like a viper's, the eyes high on its skull. There was no ridged forehead, instead the skull sloped back to a basal serration almost buried in neck and jaw muscles.

A dragon roughly cast, a creature exhaling an aura of primordial antiquity. And, Kulp realized with a breathless start as his senses devoured all that the creature projected, it was *undead.*

The mage felt it become aware of him as it sailed in a whisper twenty arm-spans overhead. A sudden sharpening of intensity that quickly passed into indifference.

As the dragon's wake arrived with a piercing wind, Kulp rolled onto his back and hissed the few words of High Meanas he possessed. The warren's fabric parted, a tear barely large enough to allow the passage of a horse. But it opened onto a vacuum, and the shrieking wind became a roar.

Still hovering between realms, Kulp watched in awe as *Silanda's* mud-crusted, battered prow filled the rent. The fabric split wider, then yet wider. Suddenly, the ship's beam seemed appallingly broad. The mage's awe turned to fear, then terror. *Oh* no, *I've really done it now.*

Milky, foaming water gushed in around the ship's hull. The portalway was tearing wider on all sides, uncontrolled, as the weight of a sea began to rush through.

A wall of water descended on Kulp and a moment later it struck, destroying his anchor, his spiritual presence. He was back in the pitching, groaning captain's cabin. Heboric was half in and half out of the cabin doorway, scrambling to find purchase as *Silanda* rode the wave.

The ex-priest shot Kulp a glare when he saw the mage clamber upright. 'Tell me you planned this! Tell me you've got it all under control, Mage!'

'Of course, you idiot! Can't you tell?' He climbed his way round the bolted-down furniture to the passage, stepping over Heboric as he went. 'Hold the fort, old man, we're counting on you!'

Heboric snarled a few choice words after him as Kulp made his way to the main deck.

If the Unwelcome's passage was to be bitterly tolerated and not directly opposed by the powers within Meanas, the rending of the warren obliterated the option of restraint. This was damage on a cosmic scale, a wounding quite possibly beyond repair.

I may just have destroyed my own warren. If reality can't be fooled. Of course it can be fooled – I do it all the time!

Kulp scrambled onto the main deck and hurried to the sterncastle. Gesler and Stormy were at the steering oar, both men grinning like demented fools as they struggled to stay the course. Gesler pointed forward and Kulp turned to see the vague, ghostlike apparition of the dragon, its narrow, bony tail waving in side-to-side rhythm like a snake crossing sand. As he watched, the creature's wedge-shaped head appeared as it twisted to cast its dead, black eye sockets in their direction.

Gesler waved.

Shaking himself, Kulp forced his way into the wind, coming to the stern rail which he gripped with both hands. The rent was already far away – *yet still visible, meaning it must be ... oh, Hood!* Water gushed in a tumbling torrent within the wake left by the Soletaken dragon. That it did not spread out to all sides was due entirely to the mass of shadows Kulp saw assailing its edges – and being destroyed in the effort. Yet still more arrived. The task

of healing the breach was so overwhelming as to deny any opportunity of approaching the rent, of sealing the wound itself.

Shadowthrone! And every other hoary Ascendant bastard within hearing! Maybe I've got no faith in any of you, but you'd better acquire a faith in me. And fast! Illusion's my gift, here and now. Believe! Eyes on the rent, Kulp braced his legs wide, then released the stern rail and raised high both arms.

It shall close ... it *shall heal!* The scene before him wavered, the tear sealing, stitching together the edges. The water slowed. He pushed harder, willing the illusion to become real. His limbs shook. Sweat sprang out on his skin, soaked his clothing.

Reality pushed back. The illusion blurred. Kulp's knees buckled. He gripped the railing to keep himself upright. He was failing. *No strength left. Failing. Dying...*

The force that struck him from behind was like a physical blow to the back of his head. Stars spasmed across his vision. An alien power swept through him, flinging his body back upright. Spread-eagled, he felt his feet leave the tilted deck. The power held him, hovering in place, a will as cold as ice flooding his flesh.

The power was undead. The will that gripped him was a dragon's. Tinged with irritation, reluctant to act, it nevertheless grasped the illogic of Kulp's sorcerous effort ... and gave it all the force it needed. Then more.

He screamed, pain lancing through him with glacial fire.

Undead cared nothing for the limits of mortal flesh, a lesson now burning in his bones.

The distant rent closed. All at once other powers were channelling through the mage. Ascendants, grasping Kulp's outrageous intent, swept in to join the game with dark glee. *Always a game. Damn you bastards one and all! I take back my prayers! Hear me? Hood take you all!*

He realized the pain was gone, the Soletaken dragon withdrawing its attention as soon as other forces arrived to take its place. He remained hovering a few feet above the deck, however, his limbs twitching as the

powers using him playfully plucked at his mortality. Not the indifference of an undead, but malice. Kulp began to yearn for the former.

He fell suddenly, cracking both knees on the dirt-smeared deck. Too! *done with, now discarded . . .*

Stormy was at his side, waving a wineskin before the mage's face. Kulp grasped it and poured until his mouth was full of the tart liquid.

'We ride the dragon's wake,' the soldier said. 'Though not on water any more. That gush has closed up tight as a sapper's arse. Whatever you did, Mage, it worked.'

'Not over yet,' Kulp muttered, trying to still his trembling limbs. He swallowed more wine.

'Watch yourself with that, then,' Stormy said with a grin. 'It packs a punch, right to the back of the head—'

'I won't notice the difference – my skull's already full of pulp.'

'You lit up with blue fire, Mage. Never seen anything like it. Make a damned good tavern tale.'

'Ah, I've achieved immortality at last. Take that, Hood!'

'Well enough to stand?'

Kulp was not too proud to accept the soldier's arm as he tottered to his feet. 'Give me a few moments,' he said, 'then I'll try to slip us from the warren ... back to our realm.'

'Will the ride be as rough, Mage?'

'I hope not.'

Felisin stood on the forecastle deck, watching the mage and Stormy passing the wineskin between them. She had felt the presence of the Ascendants, the cold, bloodless attention plucking and prodding at the ship and all who

were upon it. The dragon was the worst of them all, gelid and remote. *Like fleas on its hide, that's all we were to it.*

She swung about. Baudin was studying the massive winged apparition cleaving the path ahead, his bandaged hand resting lightly on the carved rail. Whatever they rode rolled beneath them in a whispering surge. The oars still plied with remorseless patience, though it was clear that *Silanda* was moving more swiftly than anything muscle and bone could achieve – even when those muscles and bones were undead.

Look *at us. A handful of destinies. We command nothing, not even our next step in this mad, fraught journey. The mage has his sorcery, the old soldier his stone sword and the other two their faith in the Tusked God. Heboric . . . Heboric has nothing. And as for me, I have pocks and scars. So much for our possessions.*

'The beast prepares...'

She glanced over at Baudin. *Oh yes, I forgot the thug. He has*

his secrets, for what that's worth, like as not scant little. 'Prepares what? Are you an expert in dragons as well?'

'Something's opening ahead – there's a change in the sky. See it?'

She did. The unrelieved grey pall had acquired a stain ahead, a smudge of brass that deepened, grew larger. A *word to the mage,* I *think*—

But even as she turned, the stain blossomed, filling half the sky. From somewhere far behind them came a howl of curdled outrage. Shadows sped across their path, tumbled to the sides as *Silanda's* prow clove through them. The dragon crooked its wings, vanishing into a blazing inferno of bronze fire.

Spinning, Baudin wrapped Felisin in his huge arms and ducked down around her as the fire swept over the ship. She heard his hiss as the flames engulfed them.

The dragon's found a warren . . . to sear the fleas from its hide!

She flinched as the flames licked around Baudin's protective mass. She could smell him burning – the leather shirt, the skin of his back, his hair. Her gasps drew agony into her lungs.

Then Baudin was running, carrying her effortlessly in his arms, leaping down the companionway to the main deck. Voices were shouting. Felisin caught a glimpse of Heboric – his tattoos wreathed in black smoke – staggering, striking the port rail, then plummeting over the ship's side.

Silanda burned.

Still running, Baudin plunged past the mainmast. Kulp lunged into view and grasped the thug's arms as he tried to scream something the roaring fires swept away. But Baudin had become a thing mindless in its pain. His arm flung outward, and the mage was hurled back through the flames.

Bellowing, Baudin lurched on, a blind, hopeless flight to the sterncastle. The marines had vanished – either incinerated or dying somewhere below decks. Felisin did not struggle. Seeing that no escape was possible, she almost welcomed the bites of fire that now came with increasing frequency.

She simply watched as Baudin carried her over the stern rail.

They fell.

The breath was knocked from her lungs as they struck hard-packed sand. Still clutched in an embrace, they rolled down a steep slope and came to rest amidst a pile of water-smoothed cobbles. The bronze fire was gone.

Dust settling around them, Felisin stared up at bright sunlight. Somewhere near her head flies buzzed, the sound so natural that she trembled – as if desperately held defensive walls were crumbling within her. *We've returned. Home.* She knew it with instinctive certainty.

Baudin groaned. Slowly he pushed himself away, the cobbles sliding and grating beneath him.

She looked at him. The hair was gone from his head, leaving a flash-burned pate the colour of mottled bronze. His leather shirt was nothing but stitched strips hanging down his broad back like fragments of charred

webbing. If anything, the skin of his back was darker and more mottled than that of his head. The bandages on his hand were gone as well, revealing swollen fingers and bruised joints. Incredibly, his skin was not cracked, not split open; instead, he had the appearance of having been gilded. *Tempered.*

Baudin rose, slowly, each move aching with precision. She saw him blink, draw a deep breath. His eyes widened as he looked down at himself.

Not what you were expecting. The pain fades – I see it in your face – now only a memory. You've survived, but somehow ... it all feels different. It feels. You feel.

Can nothing Ml you, Baudin?

He glanced at her, then frowned.

'We're alive,' she said.

She followed suit when he clambered upright. They stood in a narrow arroyo, a gorge where flash floods had swept through with such force as to pack the bends of the channel with skull-sized rocks. The cut was less than five paces wide, the sides twice the height of a man and banded in variously coloured layers of sand.

The heat was fierce. Sweat ran in runnels down her back. 'Can you see anywhere we can climb out?' she asked.

'Can you smell Otataral?' Baudin muttered.

A chill wrapped her bones. We're *back* on *the island*— 'No. Can you?'

He shook his head. 'Can't smell a damned thing. Just a thought.'

'Not a nice one,' she snapped. 'Let's find a way out.' *You expect me to thank you for saving my life, don't you? You're waiting for even a single word, or maybe something as small as a look, a meeting of the eyes. You can wait for ever, thug.*

They worked their way along the choked channel, surrounded by a whirring cloud of flies and their own echoes.

'I'm ... heavier,' Baudin said after a few minutes.

She paused, glanced back at him. 'What?'

He shrugged. 'Heavier.' He kneaded his own arm with his uninjured hand. 'More solid. I don't know. Something's changed.'

Something's changed. She stared at him, the emotions within her twisting around unvoiced fears.

'I could've sworn I was burning away to bones,' he said, his frown deepening.

'I haven't changed,' she said, turning and continuing on. She heard him follow a moment later.

They found a side channel, a cleft where torrents of water had rushed down to join the main channel's course, cutting through the layers of sandstone. This track quickly lost its depth, opening out after twenty or so paces. They emerged onto the edge of a range of blunt hills overlooking a broad valley of cracked earth. More hills, sharper and ragged, rose on the other side, blurry behind waves of heat.

Five hundred paces out on the pan stood a figure. At its feet lay a humped shape.

'Heboric,' Baudin said, squinting. 'The one standing.'

And the other one? Dead or alive? And who?

They walked side by side towards the ex-priest, who now watched them. His clothing too had burned away to little more than charred rags. Yet his flesh, beneath that skein of tattooing, was unmarred.

As they neared, Heboric gestured towards his own bald pate. 'Suits you, Baudin,' he said with a wry grin.

'What?' Felisin's tone was caustic. 'Are you two a brotherhood now?'

The figure at the old man's feet was the mage, Kulp. Her gaze fell to him. 'Dead.'

'Not quite,' Heboric said. 'He'll live, but he hit something going over the side.'

'Awaken him, then,' Felisin said. 'I don't plan on waiting in this heat just so he can get some beauty sleep. We're in a desert again, old man, in case you hadn't noticed. And desert means thirst, not to mention the fact that we're without food or anything like supplies. And finally, we've no idea where we are—'

'On the mainland,' Heboric said. 'Seven Cities.'

'How do you know that?'

The ex-priest shrugged. 'I know.'

Kulp groaned, then sat upright. One hand gingerly probing a lump above his left eye, the mage looked around. His expression soured.

'The Seventh Army's camped just over yonder,' Felisin said.

For a moment he looked credulous, then he gave a weary smile. 'Funny, lass.' He climbed to his feet and scanned the horizon on all sides before tilting his head back and sniffing the air. 'Mainland,' he pronounced.

'Why didn't all that white hair burn off?' Felisin asked. 'You're not even singed.'

'That dragon's warren,' Heboric said, 'what was it?'

'Damned if I know,' Kulp admitted, running a hand through the white shock on his head as if to confirm that it still existed. 'Chaos, maybe – a storm of it between warrens – I don't know. Never seen anything like it before, though that don't mean much – I'm no Ascendant, after all—'

'I'll say,' Felisin muttered.

The mage squinted at her. 'Those pocks on your face are fading.'

This time it was she who was startled.

Baudin grunted.

She whirled on him. 'What's so funny?'

'I saw that, only it don't make you any prettier.'

'Enough of this,' Heboric said. 'It's midday, meaning it'll get hotter before it gets cooler. We need somewhere to shelter.'

'Any sign of the marines?' Kulp asked.

'They're dead,' Felisin said. 'They went below decks, only the ship was on fire. Dead. Fewer mouths to feed.'

No-one replied to that.

Kulp took the lead, evidently choosing as their destination the far ridge of hills. The others followed without comment.

Twenty minutes later Kulp paused. 'We'd better pick up our pace. I smell a storm coming.'

Felisin snorted. 'All I smell is rank sweat – you're standing too close, Baudin, go away.'

'I'm sure he would if he could,' Heboric muttered, not un-sympathetically. A moment later he looked up in surprise, as if he had not intended to voice aloud that thought. His toadlike face twisted in dismay.

Felisin waited to regain control of her breathing, then she swung to face the thug.

Baudin's small eyes were like dull coins, revealing nothing.

'Bodyguard,' Kulp said, with a slow nod. His voice was cold as he addressed Heboric. 'Out with it. I want to know who our companion is, and where his loyalties lie. I let it slide before, because Gesler and his soldiers were on hand. But not now. This girl has a bodyguard – why? Right now, I can't see anyone caring a whit for a cruel-hearted creature like this one, meaning this loyalty's been bought. Who is she, Heboric?'

The ex-priest grimaced. 'Tavore's sister, Mage.'

Kulp blinked. 'Tavore? The Adjunct? Then what in Hood's name was she doing in a mining pit?'

'She sent me there,' Felisin said. 'You're right – no loyalty involved. I was just one more in Unta's cull.'

Clearly shaken, the mage spun to Baudin. 'You're a Claw, aren't you?' The air around Kulp seemed to glitter – Felisin realized he'd opened his warren. The mage bared his teeth. 'The Adjunct's remorse, in the flesh.'

'Not a Claw,' Heboric said.

'Then what?'

'That'll take a history lesson to explain—'

'Start talking.'

'An old rivalry,' the ex-priest said. 'Dancer and Surly. Dancer created a covert arm for military campaigns. In keeping with the Imperial symbol of the demon hand gripping a sphere, he called them his Talons. Surly used that model in creating the Claw. The Talons were external – outside the Empire – but the Claw were internal, a secret police, a network of spies and assassins.'

'But the Claw are used in covert military operations,' Kulp said.

'They are now. When Surly became Regent in the absence of Kellanved and Dancer, she sent her Claws after the Talons. The betrayal started subtly – a string of disastrous botched missions – but someone got careless and gave the game away. The two locked daggers and fought it out to the bitter end.'

'And the Claw won.'

Heboric nodded. 'Surly becomes Laseen, Laseen becomes Empress. The Claws sit atop the pile of skulls like well-fed crows. The Talons went the way of Dancer. Dead and gone ... or, as a few mused now and then, so far underground as to *seem* extinct.' The ex-priest grinned. 'Like Dancer himself, maybe.'

Felisin studied Baudin. *Talon. What's my sister got to do with some secret sect of revivalists still clinging to the memory of the Emperor and Dancer? Why not use a Claw? Unless she needed to work outside anyone else's knowledge.*

'It was too bitter to contemplate from the very start,' Heboric was saying. 'Throwing her younger sister into shackles like any other common victim. An example proclaiming her loyalty to the Empress—'

'Not just hers,' Felisin said. 'House Paran. Our brother's a renegade with Onearm on Genabackis. It made us ... vulnerable.'

'It all went wrong,' Heboric said, staring at Baudin. 'She wasn't meant to stay long in Skullcup, was she?'

Baudin shook his head. 'Can't pull out a person who don't want to go.' He shrugged, as if those words were enough and he would say nothing more on that subject.

'So the Talons remain,' Heboric said. 'Then who commands you?'

'No-one,' Baudin answered. 'I was born into it. There's a handful left, kicking around here and there, either old or drooling or both. A few first sons inherited ... the secret. Dancer's not dead. He ascended, alongside Kellanved – my father was there to see it, in Malaz City, the night of the Shadow Moon.'

Kulp snorted but Heboric was slowly nodding.

'I got close in my suppositions,' the ex-priest said. 'Too close for Laseen, as it turned out. She suspects or knows outright, doesn't she?'

Baudin shrugged. 'I'll ask next time we chat.'

'My need for a bodyguard is ended,' Felisin said. 'Get out of my sight, Baudin. Take my *sister's* concern through Hood's gates.'

'Lass—'

'Shut up, Heboric. I will try to kill you, Baudin. Every chance I get. You'll have to kill me to save your own skin. Go away. Now.'

The big man surprised her again. He made no appeal to the others, but simply turned away, taking a route at right angles to the one they had been travelling.

That's *it. He's* leaving. Out *of my life, without a single word.* She stared after him, wondering at the twisting in her heart.

'Damn you, Felisin,' the ex-priest snarled. 'We need him more than he needs us.'

Kulp spoke. 'I've a mind to join him and drag you with me, Heboric. Leave this foul witch to herself and Hood take her with my blessings.'

'Go ahead,' Felisin challenged.

The mage ignored her. 'I took on the responsibility of saving your skin, Heboric, and I'll stick to it because Duiker asked me. It's your call, now.'

The old man hugged himself. 'I owe her my life—'

'Thought you'd forgotten that,' Felisin sneered.

He shook his head.

Kulp sighed. 'All right. I suspect Baudin will do better without us, in any case. Let's get going before I melt, and maybe you can explain to me your comment about Dancer still being alive, Heboric? That's a very intriguing idea...'

Felisin shut their words away as she walked. This *changes nothing, dear sister. Your cherished agent murdered my lover, the only person in Skullcup who gave a damn about me. I was Baudin's assignment, nothing more, and worse, he was incompetent, a bumbling, thick-skulled fool. Carrying around his father's secret sigil – how pathetic! I will find you, Tavore. There, in my river of blood. That I promise—*

'—sorcery.'

The word jarred her into awareness. She looked over at Kulp. The mage had quickened his step, his face pale.

'What did you say?' she asked.

'I said that storm rolling up behind us isn't natural, that's what I said.'

She glanced back. A bruised wall of sand cut the valley down its length – the hills she and Baudin had left earlier had vanished. The wall rolled towards them like a leviathan.

'Time to run, I think,' Heboric gasped at her side. 'If we can reach the hills —'

'I know where we are!' Kulp shouted. 'Raraku! That's the Whirlwind!'

Ahead, two hundred or more paces away, rose the ragged, rock-strewn slopes of the hills. Deep defiles cut between each hump, like the imprint of vast ribs.

The three of them ran, knowing that they would not make it in time. The wind that struck their back howled like a thing demented. A moment later, the sand engulfed them.

'The truth of it was, we were out hunting Sha'ik's corpse.'

Fiddler frowned at the Trell sitting opposite him. 'Corpse? She's dead? How? When?' *Was this your doing, Kalam? I can't believe it—*

'Iskaral Pust claims she was murdered by a troop of Red Blades from Ehrlitan. Or so the Deck whispered to him.'

'I had no idea the Deck of Dragons could be so precise.'

'As far as I know, it cannot.'

They were sitting on stone benches within a burial chamber at least two levels below the Shadow priest's favoured haunts. The benches were attached alongside a rough-hewn wall that had once held painted tiles, and the indents in the limestone beneath them made it clear that the benches were actually pedestals, meant to hold the dead.

Fiddler flexed his leg, reached down and kneaded his knuckles in the still-swollen flesh around the mended bone. *Elixirs, unguents . . . forced healing still hurts.* His emotions were dark – had been for days now as the High Priest of Shadow found one excuse after another for delaying their

departure, the latest being the need for more supplies. In a strange way Iskaral Pust reminded the sapper of Quick Ben, the squad's mage. An endless succession of plans within plans. He imagined peeling through them one by one, right down to thumbprint schemes all awhirl in devious patterns. It's *quite possible that his very existence is nothing more than a collection of if-this and then-that suppositions. Hood's* Abyss, *maybe that's all we* all *are!*

The High Priest made his head spin. *As bad as Quick Ben and this Togg's thorn called Tremorlor. An Azath House, like the Deadhouse in Malaz City. But what are they, precisely? Does any-one know? Anyone at all?* There were nothing but rumours, obscure warnings, and few of those at that. Most people did their best to ignore such Houses – the denizens of Malaz City seemed to nurture an almost deliberate ignorance. *']ust an abandoned house,' they say. 'Nothing special, except maybe a few spooks in the yard.' But there's a skittish look in the eyes of some of them.*

Tremorlor, a House of the Azath. *Sane people don't go looking for places like that.*

'Something on your mind, soldier?' Mappo Runt quietly asked. 'I've been watching such a progression of expressions on your face as to fill a wall in Dessembrae's temple.'

Dessembrae. The Cult of Dassem.

'It appears I've just said something unwelcome to your ears,' Mappo continued.

'Eventually a man reaches a point where every memory is unwelcome,' Fiddler said, gritting his teeth. 'I think I've reached that point, Trell. I'm feeling old, used up. Pust has something in mind – we're part of some colossal scheme that'll likely see us dead before too long. Used to be I'd get a sniff or two of stuff like that. Had a nose for trouble, you might say. But I can't work it out – not this time. He's baffled me, plain and simple.'

'I think it's to do with Apsalar,' Mappo said after a time.

'Aye. And that worries me. A lot. She don't deserve any more grief.'

'Icarium pursues the question,' the Trell said, squinting down at the cracked, worn pavestones. The lantern's oil was getting low, deepening the chamber's gloom. 'I admit I have been wondering if the High Priest is intending to force Apsalar into a role she seems made for . ..'

'A role? Like what?'

'Sha'ik's prophecy speaks of a rebirth .. .'

The sapper paled, then vehemently shook his head. 'No. She wouldn't do it. This land's not hers, the goddess of the Whirlwind means nothing to her. Pust can try and force it all he wants, the lass will turn her back – mark my words.' Suddenly restless, Fiddler stood up and began pacing. His foot-falls whispered with faint echoes in the chamber. 'If Sha'ik's dead, she's dead. Hood take any obscure prophecies! The Apocalypse will fizzle out, the Whirlwind sink back into the ground to sleep another thousand years or however long it is until the next Year of Dryjhna comes around ...'

'Yet Pust seems to place much significance on this uprising,' Mappo said. 'It's far from over – or so he seems to believe.'

'How many gods and Ascendants are playing in this game, Trell?' Fiddler paused, eyeing the ancient warrior. 'Does she physically resemble Sha'ik?'

Mappo shrugged his massive shoulders. 'I saw the Whirlwind Seer but once, and that at a distance. Light-skinned for a Seven Cities native. Dark eyes, not especially tall or imposing. It's said the power is – was – within her eyes. Dark and cruel.' He shrugged a second time. 'Older than Apsalar. Perhaps twice her years. Same black hair, though. Details are irrelevant in matters of faith and attendant prophecies, Fiddler. Perhaps only the role need be reborn.'

'The lass ain't interested in vengeance against the Malazan Empire,' the sapper growled, resuming his pacing.

'And what of the shadowy god who once possessed her?'

'Gone,' he snapped. 'Nothing but memories and blissfully few of those.'

'Yet daily she discovers more. True?'

Fiddler said nothing. If Crokus had been present, the walls would have been resounding with his anger – the lad had a fierce temper when it came to Apsalar. Crokus was young, not by nature cruel, but the sapper felt certain that the lad would kill Iskaral Pust without hesitation at the mere possibility of the High Priest seeking to use Apsalar. And trying *to kill* Pust *would probably prove suicidal.* Bearding a priest in his den was never a wise move.

The lass was finding her memories, it was true. And they weren't shocking her as much as Fiddler would have expected – *or hoped.* Another disturbing sign. Although he told Mappo that Apsalar would refuse such a role, the sapper had to admit – to himself at least – that he couldn't be so certain.

With memories came the remembrance of power. *And let's face it, there are few – in this world or any other – who'd turn their back on the promise of power.* Iskaral Pust would know that, and that knowledge would shape any offer he made. *Take on this role, lass, and you can topple an empire ...*

'Of course,' Mappo said, leaning back against the wall and sighing, 'we may be on entirely the wrong ...' He slowly sat forward again, brows knitting.'... trail.'

Fiddler's eyes narrowed on the Trell. 'What do you mean?'

'The Path of Hands. The convergence of Soletaken and D'ivers – Pust is involved.'

'Explain.'

Mappo pointed a blunt finger at the paving stones beneath them. 'At the lowest levels of this temple there lies a chamber. Its floor – flagstones – displays a series of carvings. Inscribing something like a Deck of Dragons. Neither Icarium nor I have seen anything like it before. If it is indeed a Deck, it's an Elder version. Not Houses, but Holds, the forces more elemental, more raw and primitive.'

'How does that relate to shapeshifting?'

'You can view the past as something like a mouldy old book. The closer you get to the beginning, the more fragmented are the pages. They veritably fall apart in your hands, and you're left with but a handful of words – most of them in a language you can't even understand.' Mappo closed his eyes for a long moment, then he looked up and said, 'Somewhere among those scattered words is recounted the creation of shapeshifters – the forces that are Soletaken and D'ivers are that old, Fiddler. They were old even in Elder times. No one species can claim propriety, and that includes the four Founding Races: Jaghut, Forkrul Assail, Imass and K'Chain Che'Malle.

'No shapeshifter can abide another – under normal circumstances, that is. There are exceptions but I need not go into them here. Yet, within them all, there is a hunger as deep in the bone as the bestial fever itself. The lure to *dominance*. To command all other shapeshifters, to fashion an army of such creatures – all slaved to your desire. From an army, an Empire. An Empire of ferocity unlike anything that has been seen before—'

Fiddler grunted. 'Are you implying that an Empire born of Soletaken and D'ivers would be inherently worse – more evil – than any other? I'm surprised, Trell. Nastiness grows like a cancer in any and every organization – human or otherwise, as you well know. And nastiness gets nastier. Whatever evil you let ride becomes commonplace, eventually. Problem is, it's easier to get used to it than carve it out.'

Mappo's answering smile was broken-hearted. 'Well said, Fiddler. When I said ferocity I meant a miasma of chaos. But I will grant you that terror thrives equally well in order.' He rolled his shoulders a third time, sat straighter to work out kinks in his back. 'The shapeshifters are gathering to the promise of a gate through which they can attain such Ascendancy. To become a god of the Soletaken and D'ivers – each shapeshifter seeks nothing less, and will abide no obstacle. Fiddler, we think the gate lies below, and we think that Iskaral Pust will do all he can to prevent the shapeshifters from finding it – even to painting false trails in the desert, to mimic the trail of handprints that all lead to the place of the gate.'

'And Pust has a role in mind for you and Icarium?'

'Likely,' Mappo conceded. His face was suddenly ashen. 'I believe he knows about us – about Icarium, that is. He *knows* ...'

Knows what? Fiddler was tempted to ask, though he realized that the Trell would not willingly explain. The name Icarium was known – not widely, but known nonetheless. A Jaghut-blood wanderer around whom swirled, like the blackest wake, rumours of devastation, appalling murders, genocide. The sapper mentally shook his head. The Icarium he was coming to know made those rumours seem ludicrous. The Jhag was generous, compassionate. If horrors still trailed in his wake they must be ancient – youth was the time of excess, after all. This Icarium was too wise, too scarred, to tumble into power's river of blood. What did Pust hope would be unleashed by these two?

'Perhaps,' Fiddler said, 'you and Icarium are Pust's last line of defence. Should the Path converge here.' Aye, *preventing the shapeshifters from reaching the gate's a good thing, but the. effort may prove fatal...* or, it *seems, something worse.*

'Possibly,' Mappo admitted glumly.

'Well, you could leave.'

The Trell looked up, smiled wryly. 'Icarium has his own quest, I'm afraid. Thus, we shall remain.'

Fiddler's eyes narrowed. 'You two would seek to prevent the gate from being used, wouldn't you? That's what Iskaral Pust knows, that's what he relies upon, isn't it? He's used your sense of duty and honour against you.'

'A powerful ploy. And given its efficacy, he might well use it again – with the three of you.'

Fiddler scowled. 'He'd be hard-pressed to find me that loyal about anything. While being a soldier relies on such things as duty and honour, it's also something that beats Hood out of both of them. As for Crokus, his loyalty is to Apsalar. And as for her...' He fell silent.

'Aye.' Mappo reached out and settled a hand on the sapper's shoulder. 'And so I can see the cause of your distress, Fiddler. And empathize.'

'You say you'll escort us to Tremorlor.'

'We shall. The journey will be fraught. Icarium has decided to guide you.'

'Then it truly exists.'

'I certainly hope so.'

'I think it's time we rejoined the others.'

'And recount for them our thoughts?'

'Hood's breath, no!'

The Trell nodded, pushing himself to his feet.

Fiddler hissed.

'What is it?' Mappo asked.

'The lantern's out. Has been for some time. We're in the dark, Trell.'

The temple was oppressive to Fiddler's mind. The squat, cyclopean walls leaned and sagged in the lower levels, as if buckling under the weight of the stone overhead. Dust sifted like water from the ceiling joins in places, leaving pyramids on the paving stones. He limped in Mappo's wake as they made their way to the spiral stairs that would take them back up to the others.

Half a dozen bhok'arala shadowed them on the way, each gripping leafy branches that they used to sweep and swat the stones as they scampered along. The sapper would have been more amused if the creatures had not achieved such perfection in their mimicry of Iskaral Pust and his obsession with spiders – right down to the fierce concentration on their round, wrinkled black faces.

Mappo had explained that the creatures worshipped the High Priest. Not like a dog its master, but like acolytes their god. Offerings, obscure symbols and fitful icons crowded their awkward rituals. Many of those rituals seemed to involve bodily wastes. *When you can't produce holy books*,

produce what you can, I suppose. The creatures drove Iskaral Pust to distraction. He cursed them, and had taken to carrying rocks in a sack. He flung the missiles at the bhok'arala at every opportunity.

The winged creatures gathered those god-sent objects and clearly revered them – the High Priest had found the sack carefully refilled when he awoke this morning. Pust had flown into a spitting rage at the discovery.

Mappo nearly stumbled over a cache of torches on the way. Darkness was anathema to shadows. Pust wanted to encourage an escort of his god's minions. They lit one each, sardonically aware of their ulterior value. While Mappo could see well enough without their aid, Fiddler had been left groping, one hand clutching the Trell's chest harness.

They reached the staircase and paused. The bhok'arala held back a dozen paces down the aisle, twittering among themselves in some obscure but vehement argument.

'Icarium has passed this way recently,' Mappo said.

'Does sorcery heighten your sensitivity?' Fiddler asked.

'Not precisely. More like centuries of companionship—'

'That which links you to him, you mean.'

The Trell grunted. 'Not one chain but a thousand, soldier.'

'Is your friendship such a burden, then?'

'Some burdens are willingly embraced.'

Fiddler was silent for a few breaths. 'It's said Icarium is obsessed with time, true?'

'Aye.'

'He builds bizarre constructs to measure it, places those constructs in locations all over the world.'

'His temporal maps, yes.'

'He feels he is nearing his goal, doesn't he? He's about to find his answer – the one you would do anything to prevent. Is that your vow, Mappo? To keep the Jhag ignorant?'

'Ignorant of the past, yes. His past.'

'That notion frightens me, Mappo. Without history there's no growth—'

'Aye.'

The sapper fell silent again. He'd run out of things he dared to say. *There's such pain in this giant warrior. Such sadness. Has Icarium never wondered? Never questioned this centuries-long partnership? And what* is *friendship to the Jhag? Without memory it's an illusion, an agreement taken on faith and faith alone. How on earth is lcarium's generosity born from that?*

They resumed their journey, climbing the saddle-backed stone steps. After a short pause, punctuated by what Fiddler was convinced was heated whispering, the bhok'arala fell silent and slipped into their wake once again.

Emerging onto the main level, Mappo and Fiddler were accosted with the harsh echo of a shouting voice, bouncing down the hallway from the altar chamber. The sapper grimaced. 'That would be Crokus.'

'Not in prayer, I take it.'

They found the young Daru thief at the extreme edge of his patience. He held Iskaral Pust by the front of his robe, pushed up against the wall behind the dusty altarstone. Pust's feet dangled ten inches above the flagstones, kicking feebly. Off to one side stood Apsalar, arms crossed, watching the scene without expression.

Fiddler stepped forward and laid a hand on the lad's shoulder. 'You're choking the life out of him, Crokus—'

'Precisely what he deserves, Fiddler!'

'I won't argue that, but in case you haven't noticed, there's shadows gathering.'

'He's right,' Apsalar said. 'Like I said before, Crokus. You're moments from Hood's Gates yourself.'

The Daru hesitated; then, with a snarl, he flung Pust away. The High Priest skidded along the wall, gasping, then straightened and began adjusting his robe. He spoke in a rasp. 'Precipitous youth! I am reminded of my own melodramatic gestures when I but toddled about in Aunt Tulla's yard. Bullying the chickens when they objected to the straw hats I had spent hours weaving. Incapable of appreciating the intricate plaits I devised. I was deeply offended.' He cocked his head, grinned up at Crokus. 'She'll look good in my new and improved straw hat—'

Fiddler intercepted Crokus's lunge and grappled with the lad. With Mappo's help he pulled him back as the High Priest scampered away, giggling.

The giggle broke into a fit of coughing that had Pust staggering about as if suddenly blinded. One groping hand found a wall, which he sagged against like a drunkard. The cough ended with a last hack, then he wiped his eyes and looked up.

Crokus growled, 'He wants Apsalar to—'

'We know,' Fiddler said. 'We worked that much out, lad. The point is, it's up to her, isn't it?'

Mappo glanced at him in surprise. The sapper shrugged. *Late in this wisdom, but I got there eventually.*

'I have been used by an Ascendant once,' Apsalar said. 'I'll not willingly be used again.'

'You are not to be used,' Iskaral Pust hissed, beginning a strange dance, 'you lead! You command! You impose your will! Dictate terms! Free to express every tantrum, enforce every whim, act like a spoiled child and be worshipped for it!' He ducked down suddenly, paused, then said in a whisper, 'Such lures as to entice! Self-examination is dispensed with at the beck and at the call of privileges unfettered! She wavers, she leans – see it in her eyes!'

'I do not,' Apsalar said coolly.

'She does! Such percipience in the lass as to sense my every thought – as if she could hear them aloud! The Rope's shadow remains within her, a linkage not to be denied! Gods, I am brilliant!'

With a disgusted snort Apsalar strode from the chamber.

Iskaral Pust scurried after her.

Fiddler held back the Daru's attempt to pursue. 'She can handle him, Crokus,' the sapper said. 'That should be plain – even to you.'

'There are more mysteries here than you imagine,' Mappo said, frowning after the High Priest.

They heard voices in the hall, then Icarium appeared at the entrance, wearing his deer-hide cloak with the dust of the desert on his dusky green skin. He saw the question in Mappo's eyes and shrugged. 'He's left the temple – I trailed him as far as the storm's edge.'

Fiddler asked, 'Who are you talking about?'

'Servant,' Mappo answered, his frown deepening. He glanced at Crokus. 'We think he's Apsalar's father.'

The lad's eyes widened. 'Is he one-armed?'

'No,' Icarium replied. 'Iskaral Pust's servant is a fisherman, however. Indeed, his barque can be found in a lower chamber of this temple. He speaks Malazan—'

'Her father lost an arm at the siege of Li Heng,' Crokus said, shaking his head. 'He was among the rebels who held the walls, and had his arm burned off when the Imperial Army retook the city.'

'When a god intervenes...' Mappo said, then shrugged. 'One of his arms looks ... young ... younger than the other, Crokus. Servant was sent into hiding when we brought you back here. Pust was hiding him from you. Why?'

Icarium spoke. 'Was it not Shadowthrone who arranged the possession? When Cotillion took her, Shadowthrone may well have taken *him.* There is little point in trying to guess at motivations – the Lord of the Shadow Realm is notoriously obscure. Nonetheless, I see a certain logic in the possibility.'

Crokus had gone pale. His gaze snapped to the vacant entranceway. 'Leverage,' he whispered.

Fiddler instantly grasped the Daru's meaning. He turned to Icarium. 'You said Servant's trail led into the Whirlwind storm. Is there a particular place where Sha'ik is expected to be reborn?'

'The High Priest says her body has not been moved from where it fell at the hands of the Red Blades.'

'Within the storm?'

The Jhag nodded.

'He's telling her right now,' Crokus growled, his hands balling into fists, the knuckles whitening.' *"Be reborn, and you shall be reunited with your father."'*

' "A life given for a life taken,"' Mappo muttered. The Trell eyed the sapper. 'Are you mended well enough for a pursuit?'

Fiddler nodded. 'I can ride, walk ... or crawl if it comes to that.'

'I shall prepare for our departure, then.'

In the small storage room where the gear and travel packs had been assembled, Mappo crouched down over his own sack. He rummaged amidst the bedrolls and canvas tent until his hands found the hard, hide-wrapped object he sought. The Trell pulled it forth and slipped the waxed elk hide away, revealing a solid long-bone half again the length of his forearm. The shaft was golden in lustre, polished by age. Leather cord was wrapped around the grip, enough for two hands. The distal end was ringed in

similarly polished spike-shaped teeth – each the size of his thumb – set in an iron collar.

A hint of sage reached Mappo's nostrils. The sorcery within the weapon was still potent. The efforts of seven Trell witches was not a thing to fade with time. The long-bone had been found in a mountain stream. The mineral-rich water had made it hard as iron, and just as heavy. Other parts of the strange, unknown beast's skeleton had been recovered as well, though those had remained with the Clan as revered objects, each invested with power.

Only once had Mappo seen all the fragments laid out together, hinting at a beast twice the mass of a plains bear, the upper and lower jaws both sporting a row of fangs that roughly interlocked. The thigh bone – which he now held in his hands – had the shape of a bird's, yet impossibly huge and twice as thick as the hollow shaft it surrounded. Ridges appeared here and there along the shaft, where what must have been massive muscles were attached.

His hands trembled beneath the burden of the weapon.

Icarium spoke behind him. 'I do not recall you ever using that, friend.'

Unwilling as yet to turn to the Jhag, Mappo closed his eyes. 'No.' *You do* not.

'I am continually astonished,' Icarium went on, 'at just how much you manage to fit into that tattered sack.'

Another trick of the Clan witches – this small, private warren beyond the drawstrings. Should never have lasted this long. They said a month, maybe two. Not centuries. His gaze fell again to the weapon in his hands. *There was power in these bones to start with – the witches simply did some enhancements, spells of binding to keep the parts together and such. Perhaps the bone feeds the warren in the sack somehow . . . or the handful of irritating people I've stuffed inside in my own fits of ill temper. Wonder where they all went...* He sighed and rewrapped the weapon, returned it to the sack and cinched tight the drawstrings. Then he straightened, turning to offer Icarium a smile.

The Jhag had collected his own weapons. 'It seems our journey to find Tremorlor shall have to wait a while longer,' he said, shrugging. 'Apsalar has set off in pursuit of her father.'

'And thus will be led to the place where Sha'ik's body awaits.'

'We are to go after her,' Icarium said. 'Perhaps we can circumvent Iskaral Pust's intentions.'

'Not just Pust, it seems, but the Whirlwind goddess – who may well have shaped this from the very start.'

The Jhag frowned.

Mappo sighed again. 'Think on it, friend. Sha'ik was anointed as the Seeress of the Apocalypse almost as soon as she was born. Forty or more years in Raraku, preparing for this year ... Raraku is not a kind place, and four decades will wear down even a chosen one. Perhaps preparation was all the Seeress was meant to achieve – the war itself requires new blood.'

'Yet did not the soldier say that Cotillion's relinquishing of the lass was forced upon him by the threat of Anomander Rake? The possession was meant to last much longer, taking the lass ever closer to the Empress herself...'

'So everyone assumes,' Mappo said. 'Iskaral Pust is a High Priest of Shadow. I think it best to assume that no matter how devious Pust is, Shadowthrone and Cotillion are more devious. By far. A truly possessed Apsalar would never get close to Laseen – the Claws would sniff it out, not to mention the Adjunct and her Otataral sword. But an Apsalar no longer possessed ... well. .. and Cotillion's made sure she's not just a simple fishergirl any more, hasn't he?'

'A scheme within a scheme. Have you discussed this with Fiddler?'

Mappo shook his head. 'I may be wrong. It may be that the Rulers of Shadow simply saw an opportunity here, a means to take advantage of the convergence – the dagger is honed, then slipped in amidst the tumult. I have been wondering why Apsalar's memories are returning so swiftly . .. and so painlessly.'

'And we have no role in this?'

'That I do not know.'

'Apsalar becomes Sha'ik. Sha'ik defeats the Malazan armies, liberates the Seven Cities. Laseen, forced to take charge herself, arrives with an army to reconquer the unruly citizens of this land.'

'Armed with Cotillion's skill and knowledge, Sha'ik kills Laseen. End of Empire—'

'End?' Icarium's brows rose. 'More likely a new Emperor or Empress with Shadow the patron gods ...'

Mappo grunted. 'A worrying thought.'

'Why?'

The Trell scowled. 'I had a sudden vision of Emperor Iskaral Pust...' He shook himself, lifted the sack and swung it over a shoulder. 'For the moment, I think it best we keep this conversation to ourselves, friend.'

Icarium nodded. He hesitated, then said, 'I have one question, Mappo.'

'Aye?'

'I feel closer to discovering ... who I am ... than ever before. Tremorlor is said to be time-aspected—'

'Aye, so it's said, though what that means is anyone's guess.'

'Answers, I believe. For me. For my life.'

'What do you ask, Icarium?'

'Should I discover my past, Mappo, how will that change me?'

'You are asking me? Why?'

Icarium's gaze was half-lidded as he smiled at Mappo. 'Because, friend, within you reside my memories – none of which you are prepared to reveal.'

And so we come to this point . . . *again.* 'Who you are, Icarium, is not dependent on me, nor on my memories. What value would it be to seek to

become my version of you? I accompany you, friend, in your quest. If the truth – if *your* truth – is to be found, then you shall find it.'

Icarium was nodding, past echoes of this conversation returning to him – *but* little *else, by the* Ancients, little *else, please* – 'Yet something tells me that you, Mappo, are a part of that hidden truth.'

Ice filled the Trell's heart. He's not taken *it that far before – is Tremorlor's proximity nudging open the locked gate?* 'Then, when the time comes, you shall face a decision.'

'I think I shall.'

They studied each other, their eyes searching the altered reflection before them, one set plagued with innocent questing, the other disguising devastating knowledge. And *between us, hanging in the balance, a friendship neither understands.*

Icarium reached out and clasped Mappo's shoulder. 'We should join the others.'

Fiddler sat astride the Gral gelding as they waited at the base of the cliff. Bhok'arala scampered along the temple face, squealing and barking as they struggled with the lowering of the mule packs and assorted supplies. One had got its tail snagged in the rope and screamed pitifully as it slowly descended with the gear. Iskaral Pust hung half out of the tower window, throwing rocks at the hapless creature – none of which came close.

The sapper eyed Mappo and Icarium, sensing a new tension between them, though they continued to work together with familiar ease. The tension was in the words unspoken between the two, Fiddler suspected. *Changes are coming to us all, it seems.* He glanced over at Crokus, who sat rigid with barely restrained impatience on the spare mount he had inherited. He'd caught the lad running through a gamut of close-in knife-fighting moves a short while earlier. The few times the sapper had seen him use the knives before there'd been a kind of desperation marring his technique. Crokus had some skill but he lacked maturity – he was too conscious of

himself behind the blades. That had changed, Fiddler realized as he watched the lad go through his routine. Taking cuts was essential to delivering killing thrusts. Knife-fighting was a messy business. Cold determination backed Crokus now – he would do more than just hold his own from now on, the sapper knew. Nor would he be so quick to throw his knives, unless he had plenty of spares tucked within easy reach in the folds of his telaba. *Now more likely, I'd hazard.*

The late-afternoon sky was hazy ochre, filled with the suspended residue of the Whirlwind, which still raged in the heart of Raraku no more than ten leagues distant. The heat was made even more oppressive by that suffocating cloak.

Mappo freed the snared bhok'aral, earning a nasty bite on the wrist for his kindness. The creature half scampered, half flew back up the cliff face, voicing an abusive torrent as it went.

Fiddler called out to the Trell. 'Set us a pace, then!'

Mappo nodded and he and Icarium set off down the trail.

The sapper was glad he was the only one to glance back to see a score of bhok'arala on the cliff face waving farewell, with Iskaral Pust almost falling from the window in his efforts to sweep the nearest creatures from the tower's stone wall with his broom.

The renegade Korbolo Dom's army of the Apocalypse was spread over the rumpled carpet of grassy hills that marked the south edge of the plain. On each hilltop stood command tents and the raised banners of various tribes and self-proclaimed battalions. Between small towns of tents and wagons roamed vast herds of cattle and horses.

The encampment's pickets were marked by three ragged rows of crucified prisoners. Kites and rhizan and capemoths swarmed around each victim.

The outermost line rose above the earthworks and trench less than fifty paces away from Kalam's position. He lay flat in the high yellow grasses, the heat of the parched ground rising up around him with a smell of dust

and sage. Insects crawled over him, their prickling feet tracking aimless paths across his hands and forearms. The assassin ignored them, his eyes on the nearest of the crucified victims.

A young Malazan lad of no more than twelve or thirteen. Capemoths rode his arms from shoulder to wrist, making them look like wings. Rhizan gathered in writhing clumps at his hands and feet, where the spikes had been driven through bones and flesh. The boy had no eyes, no nose – his face was a ravaged wound – yet he still lived.

The image was etching itself into Kalam's heart like acid into bronze. His limbs felt cold, as if his own claim to life was withdrawing, pooling in his gut. I *cannot save him. I cannot even kill him in swift mercy. Not this lad, not a single one of these hundreds of Malazans surrounding this army. I can do nothing.* The knowledge was a whisper of madness. The assassin feared but one thing that left him skeined with terror: *helplessness.* But not the helplessness of being a prisoner, or of undergoing torture – he'd been victim to both, and he well knew that torture could break anyone – anyone at all. But *this* ... Kalam feared insignificance, he feared the inability to produce an effect, to force a change upon the world beyond his flesh.

It was this knowledge that the scene before him was searing into his soul. I *can do* nothing. Nothing. He stared across the intervening fifty paces into the young man's sightless sockets, the distance between diminishing with every breath, until he felt close enough to brush his lips against the boy's sun-cracked forehead. To whisper lies – *your death won't be forgotten, the truth of your precious life which you still refuse to surrender because it's all you have. You are not alone, child* – lies. The lad was alone. Alone with his withering, collapsing life. And when the body became a corpse, when it rotted and fell away to join all those others ringing a place that had once held an army, he would be forgotten. Another faceless victim. One in a number that beggared comprehension.

The Empire would exact revenge – if it was able – and the numbers would grow. The Imperial threat was ever thus: *The destruction you wreak upon us and our kind, we deliver back to you tenfold.* If Kalam succeeded in killing Laseen, then perhaps he would also succeed in guiding to the throne

someone with spine enough to avoid ruling from a position of crisis. The assassin and Quick Ben had someone in mind for that. *If all goes as planned.* But for these, it was too late.

He let out a slow breath, only now realizing he was lying on an ants' nest and its inhabitants were telling him to leave in no uncertain terms. I *lie with the weight of a god on their world, and these ants don't like it. We're so much more alike than* most *would think.*

Kalam edged back through the grasses. *Not the first scene of horror I've witnessed, after all.* A *soldier learns to wear every kind of armour, and so long as he stays in the trade, it works well enough. Gods, I don't think my sanity would survive peace!*

With that chilling thought seeping like weakness into his limbs, Kalam reached the back slope, out of the victims' line of sight. He scanned the area, seeking sign of Apt's presence, but the demon seemed to have vanished. After a moment he rose into a crouch and padded back to the aspen grove where the others waited.

Minala rose from cover as he approached the low brush encircling the silver-leafed trees, crossbow in her hands.

Kalam shook his head. In silence they both slipped between the spindly boles and rejoined the group.

Keneb had succumbed to yet another bout of fever. His wife, Selv, hovered over him in tight-lipped fear that seemed on the edge of panic, holding a water-soaked cloth to Keneb's forehead and murmuring in an effort to still his thrashing and twitching. The children, Vaneb and Kesen, stood nearby, studiously attending to their horses.

'How bad is it?' Minala asked, carefully uncocking the crossbow.

Kalam was preoccupied with plucking and brushing ants from his body for a moment, then he sighed. 'We'll not get around them. I saw standards from the west tribes – those camps are still growing, meaning the Odhan to the west won't be empty. Eastward we'd run into villages and towns, all

liberated and occupied by garrisons. That whole horizon is nothing but smoke.'

'If it was just you you'd get through,' Minala said, reaching up to brush her black hair from her face. Her light-grey eyes held hard on him. 'Just another soldier of the Apocalypse, it would be a simple task to take picket duty on the south edge, then slip away one night.'

Kalam grunted. 'Not as easy as you think. There're mages in that encampment.' *And I've held the Book in my hands – not likely I'd stay anonymous—*

'What difference would that make?' Minala asked. 'Maybe you've got a reputation, but you're no Ascendant.'

The assassin shrugged. He straightened, retrieved his pack, set it down and began rummaging through its contents.

'You haven't answered me, Corporal,' Minala continued, watching him. 'Why all this self-importance? You're not the type to delude yourself, so you must be holding something back from us. Some other . .. *significant* detail about yourself.'

'Sorcery,' Kalam muttered, pulling free a small object from the pack. 'Not mine. Quick Ben's.' He held up the object and quirked a wry grin.

'A rock.'

'Aye. Granted, it'd be more dramatic if it was a faceted gem or a tore of gold. But there's not a mage in this world stupid enough to invest power in a valuable object. After all, who'd steal a rock?'

'I've heard legends otherwise—'

'Oh, you'll find magic embedded in jewels and such – sorcerers make up dozens of them, all cursed in some way or other. Most of them are a kind of magical spying device – the sorcerer can track them, sometimes even see through them. Claws use that intelligence-gathering method all the time.' He tossed the rock in the air, caught it, then suddenly sobered. 'This was intended to be used as a last resort...' In *the palace at Unta, actually.*

'What does it do?'

The assassin grimaced. I *haven't a clue. Quick Ben's not the expansive t*ype, *the bastard. 'It's your shaved knuckle in the hole, Kalam. With this you can stride right into the throne room. I guarantee it.'* He glanced around, saw a low, flat rock nearby. 'Get everyone ready to move.'

The assassin crouched down before the flat rock, set the stone on it, then found a fist-sized cobble. He hefted it thoughtfully before bringing it crashing down on the stone.

He was shocked as it splattered like wet clay.

Darkness swept over them. Kalam looked up, slowly straightened. *Damn, I should've guessed.*

'Where are we?' Selv demanded in a high, taut voice.

'Mother!'

The assassin turned to see Kesen and Vaneb stumbling in knee-deep ash. Ash that was filled with charred bones. The horses were shying, tossing their heads as grey dust rose like smoke.

Hood's breath, we're in the Imperial Warren.' Kalam found himself standing on a broad, raised disc of grey basalt. Sky merged with land in a formless, colourless haze. I could *wring your neck, Quick Ben!* The assassin had heard rumours that such a warren had been created and the description matched, but the tales he'd picked up on Genabackis suggested that it was barely nascent, extending no more than a few hundred leagues – *if leagues mean much here* – in a ring around Unta. *Instead, it reaches all the way into Seven Cities. And Genabackis? Why not? Quick* Ben, *there could be a Claw riding your shoulder right now...*

The children had settled their horses and were now in the saddles, well away from the grisly scorched mound. Kalam glanced over to see Minala and Selv tying Keneb onto his saddle.

The assassin approached his own stallion. The beast snorted disdainfully as he swung himself up and gathered the reins.

'We're in a warren, aren't we?' Minala asked. 'I'd always believed all those tales of other realms were nothing but elaborate inventions wizards and priests used to prop up all the fumbling around they did.'

Kalam grunted. He'd been run through enough warrens and plunged into enough chaotic maelstroms of sorcery to take it for granted. Minala had just reminded him that for most people such a reality was remote, viewed with scepticism if acknowledged at all. *Is such ignorance a comfort or a source of blind fear?*

'I take it we're safe from Korbolo Dom here?'

'I certainly hope so,' the assassin muttered.

'How do we select a direction? There're no landmarks, no trail...'

'Quick Ben says you travel with an intention in mind and the warren will take you there.'

'And the destination you have in mind?'

Kalam scowled, was silent for a long moment. Then he sighed. 'Aren.'

'How safe are we?'

Safe? We've stepped into *a hornets' nest.* 'We'll see.'

'Oh, that's a comfort!' Minala snapped.

The image of the crucified Malazan boy rose once again in the assassin's thoughts. He glanced over at Keneb's children. 'Better this risk than a ... different certainty,' he muttered.

'Are you going to explain that comment?'

Kalam shook his head. 'Enough talk. I've a city to visualize...'

Lostara Yil walked her mount up to the gaping hole, understanding at once that, although she had never seen one before, this was a portalway into another warren. Its edges had begun fading, like a wound closing.

She hesitated. The assassin had chosen a short-cut, a means of slipping past the traitor's army between him and Aren. The Red Blade knew she had no choice but to follow, for the trail would prove far too cold should she manage the long way to Aren. Even getting through Korbolo Dom's forces would likely prove impossible – as a Red Blade she was bound to be recognized, even wearing unmarked armour as she did now.

Still, Lostara Yil hesitated.

Her horse reared back squealing as a figure staggered from the portalway. A man, grey-clothed, grey-skinned – even his hair was grey – straightened before her, glanced around with strangely luminous eyes, then smiled.

'Not a hole I expected to fall through,' he said in lilting Malazan. 'My apologies if I startled you.' He sketched a bow, the gesture resulting in clouds of dust cascading from him. The grey was ash, Lostara realized. Dark skin revealed itself in patches on the man's lean face.

He eyed her knowingly. 'You carry an aspected sigil. Hidden.'

'What?' Her hand drifted towards her sword hilt.

The man caught the motion, his smile broadening. 'You are a Red Blade, an officer in fact. Which makes us allies.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'Who are you?'

'Call me Pearl. Now, it seems you were about to enter the Imperial Warren. I suggest we do so before continuing our conversation – before the portalway closes.'

'Can you not keep it open, Pearl? After all, you were travelling it . . .'

The man's exaggerated frown was mocking. 'Alas, this is a door where no door should be possible. Granted, north of here even the Imperial Warren is fraught with ... unwelcome intruders... but their means of entry is far more ... primitive, shall we say... in nature. So, since this portalway is clearly not of your making, I suggest we take immediate advantage of its presence.'

'Not until I know who you are, Pearl. Rather, *what* you are.'

'I am a Claw, of course. Who else is granted the privilege of travelling the Imperial Warren?'

She nodded at the portalway. 'Someone's just granted that privilege to himself.'

Pearl's eyes sparkled. 'And this is what you shall tell me about, Red Blade.'

She sat in silence, thinking, then nodded. 'Yes. Ideal. I shall accompany you.'

Pearl took a step backward and beckoned with one gloved hand.

Lostara Yil tapped heels to her mount's flanks.

Quick Ben's shaved knuckle in the hole was slower in closing than anyone had anticipated. Seven hours after the Red Blade and the Claw had vanished within the Imperial Warren, stars glittered in the moonless sky overhead, and still the portalway gaped, its red-lined edges fading to dull magenta.

Sounds drifted into the glade, echoes of panic and alarm in Korbolo Dom's encampment. Parties of riders set out in all directions, bearing torches. Mages risked their warrens, seeking trails through the now perilous pathways of sorcery.

Thirteen hundred Malazan children had vanished, the liberation unseen by the pickets or the mounted patrols. The X-shaped wooden crosses were bare, with only stains of blood, urine and excrement to show that living beings had once hung from them in agony.

In the darkness the plain was strangely alive with shadows, flowing sourcelessly over the motionless grasses.

Apt strode silently into the glade, her daggerlike fangs gleaming their natural grin. Sweat glistened on her black hide, the thick spiny bristles of her hair wet with dew. She stood erect, her single forelimb clutching the limp body of a young boy. Blood dripped from his hands and feet, and his face had been horribly chewed and pecked, leaving him eyeless and with a

gaping red hole where his nose had been. Faint breaths from fevered, shallow lungs showed in misty plumes that drifted forlornly in the clearing.

The demon squatted down on her haunches and waited.

Shadows gathered, pouring like liquid between the trees to hover before the portalway.

Apt cocked her head and spread wide her mouth in something like a canine yawn.

A vague shape took form within the shadows. The glowing eyes of guardian Hounds appeared to flank the figure.

'I thought I had lost you,' Shadowthrone whispered to the demon. 'Snared so long by Sha'ik and her doomed goddess. Yet this night you return, not alone – oh no, not alone, aptorian. You've grown ambitious since you were but a Demon Lord's concubine. Tell me, my dear, what am I to do with over a thousand dying mortals?'

The Hounds were eyeing Apt as if the demon was a potential meal.

'Am I a cutter? A healer?' Shadowthrone's voice was rising, octave by octave. 'Is Cotillion a kindly uncle? Are my Hounds farmyard skulkers and orphans' puppies?' The shadow that was the god flared wildly. 'Have you gone entirely insane?'

Apt spoke in a rapid, rasping series of clicks and hisses.

'Of course Kalam wanted to save them!' Shadowthrone shrieked. 'But *he* knew it was impossible! Only *vengeance* was possible! But now! Now I must exhaust my powers healing a thousand maimed children! And for what?'

Apt spoke again.

'Servants? And precisely how *big* do you think Shadow Keep is, you one-armed imbecile!'

The demon said nothing, her slate-grey multifaceted eye glimmering in the starlight.

Shadowthrone hunched suddenly, his gauzelike cloak wrapping close as he hugged himself. 'An army of servants,' he whispered. *'Servants.* Abandoned by the Empire, left to their fates at the hand of Sha'ik's bloodlusted bandits. There will be ... ambivalence ... in their scarred, malleable souls ...' The god glanced up at the demon. 'I see long-term benefits in your precipitous act, demon. Lucky for you!'

Apt hissed and clicked.

'You wish to claim for your own the one in your clutches? And – if indeed you are to resume your guardianship of the Bridgeburner assassin – how precisely will you co-ordinate such conflicting responsibilities?'

The demon replied.

Shadowthrone spluttered. 'Such nerve, you coddled bitch! No wonder you fell from the Aptorian Lord's favour!' He fell silent, then, after a moment, flowed forward. 'Forced healing demands a price,' Shadowthrone murmured. 'The flesh recovers while the mind writhes with the memory of pain, that bludgeon of helplessness.' He raised a sleeve-shrouded hand to the boy's forehead. 'This child who shall ride you shall be ... unpredictable.' He hissed a laugh as the wounds began closing, as new flesh formed on the boy's ravaged face. 'What manner of eyes do you wish him to have, my dear?'

Apt answered.

Shadowthrone seemed to flinch, then he laughed again, harsh and cold this time.' "The eyes are love's prism," are they now? Will you go hand in hand to the fishmonger's on Market Day, my dear?'

The boy's head jerked back, bones altering shape, the twin gaping orbits merging to form a single larger one above a nose bridge that branched to either side, then ran up the outer edge of the socket in a thin, raised ridge. An eye to match the demon's blurred into existence.

Shadowthrone stepped back to examine his handiwork. 'Aai,' he whispered. 'Who then is it who now looks upon me through such a prism? Abyss Below, answer not!' The god spun abruptly to stare at the portalway.

'Cunning Quick Ben – I know his handiwork. He could have gone far under my patronage...'

The Malazan boy clambered to sit behind Apt's narrow, jutting shoulder blade. His frail body shook with the trauma of forced healing, and an eternity nailed to a cross, but his ghastly face showed a slightly ironic smile in a line that perfectly matched the demon's.

Apt approached the portalway.

Shadowthrone gestured. 'Go on then, trail the ones trailing the Bridgeburner. Whiskeyjack's soldiers were ever loyal, I seem to recall. Kalam does not intend to kiss Laseen's cheeks when he finds her, of that I'm certain.'

Apt hesitated, then spoke one last time.

A grimace entered the god's tone as he replied. 'That High Priest of mine alarms even me. If he cannot deceive the hunters on the Path of Hands, my precious realm – which has seen more than its share of intruders of late – will become very crowded indeed ...' Shadowthrone wagged his head. 'It was a simple task, after all.' He began to drift away, his Hounds following suit. 'Can anyone find reliable, competent help these days, I wonder ...'

A moment later Apt was alone, the shadows slipping away.

The portalway had begun to weaken, slowly closing the wound between the realms. The demon rasped words of comfort. The boy nodded.

They slid into the Imperial Warren.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ages unveiled the Holy Desert.
Raraku was once an ochre sea.
She stood in the wind
on the pride of a spire
and saw ancient fleets –
ships of bone, sails of bleached
hair, charging the crest
to where the waters slipped
beneath the sands
of the desert to come.

The Holy Desert
Anonymous

Aline of feral white goats stood on the crest of the tel known as Samon, silhouetted against a startlingly blue sky. Like bestial gods carved from marble, they watched as the vast train wound through the valley swathed in a massive cloud of dust. That they numbered seven was an omen not lost on Duiker as he rode with the south flanking patrol of Foolish Dog Wickans.

Nine hundred paces behind the historian marched five companies of the Seventh, slightly under a thousand soldiers, while the same distance behind them rode another patrol of two hundred and fifty Wickans. The three units comprised the south-facing guard for the now close to fifty thousand refugees, as well as livestock, that made up the main column, and were mirrored with similar forces on the north side. An inner ring of loyal Hissari Infantry and Marines were spread out along the column's edges – walking alongside the hapless civilians.

A rearguard of a thousand Wickans from each of the clans rode in the train's dust over two-thirds of a league east of Duiker's position. Though

split and riding in troops of a dozen or less, their task was impossible. Tithansi raiders nipped at the battered tail of the refugee column, snaring the Wickans in an eternal running skirmish. The back end of Coltaine's train was a bleeding wound never allowed to heal.

The vanguard to the refugees consisted of the surviving elements of the Seventh's attachment of medium-equipped cavalry – slightly more than two hundred riders in all. Before them rode the Malazan nobles in their carriages and wagons, flanked on either side by ten companies of the 7th Infantry. Close to a thousand additional soldiers of the Seventh – the walking wounded – provided the nobles with their own vanguard, while ahead of them rolled the wagons bearing the cutters and their more seriously injured charges. Coltaine and a thousand riders of his Crow Clan spearheaded the entire column.

But there were too many refugees and too few able combatants, and for all the Malazan efforts, Kamist Reloe's raiding parties struck like vipers in brilliantly co-ordinated mayhem. A new commander had come to Reloe's army of the Apocalypse, a nameless Tithansi warleader charged with harrying the train day and night as it crawled painfully westward – a bloodied and battered serpent that refused to die – and this warrior now posed the most serious threat to Coltaine.

A slow, calculated slaughter. We're being toyed with. The endless dust had scratched the historian's throat raw, making every swallow agony. They were running perilously low on water, the memories of Sekala River now a parched yearning. The nightly slaughter of cattle, sheep, pigs and goats had intensified, as animals were released from suffering, then butchered to flavour the vast cauldrons of blood-stew, marrow and oats that had become everyone's main sustenance. Each night the encampment became an abattoir of screaming beasts, the air alive with rhizan and capemoths drawn to the killing stations. The cacophonous uproar and chaos each dusk had scraped Duiker's nerves raw – and he was not alone in that. Madness haunted their days, stalking them as relentlessly as Kamist Reloe and his vast army.

Corporal List rode alongside the historian in numbed silence, his head dropped low on his chest, his shoulders slumped. He seemed to be ageing

before Duiker's eyes.

Their world had dwindled. *We totter on edges seen and unseen. We are reduced, yet defiant. We've lost the meaning of time. Endless motion broken only by its dulled absence – the shock of rest, of those horns sounding an end to the day's plodding. For that moment, as the dust swirls on, no-one moves. Standing in disbelief that another day has passed, and* yet *still we live.*

He'd walked the refugee camp at night, wandering between the ragged rows of tents, lean-tos and canopied wagons, his eyes taking in all that he saw with perverse detachment. *The historian, now witness, stumbling in the illusion that he will survive. Long enough to set the details down on parchment in the frail belief that truth is a worthwhile cause. That the tale will become a lesson heeded. Frail belief? Outright lie, a delusion of the worst sort. The lesson of history is that no-one learns.*

Children were dying. He'd crouched, one hand on a mother's shoulder, and watched with her as life ebbed from the baby in her arms. *Like the light of an oil lamp, dimming, dimming, winking out. The moment when the struggle's already lost, surrendered, and the tiny heart slows in its own realization, then stops in mute wonder. And never stirs again.* It was then that pain filled the vast caverns within the living, destroying all it touched with its rage at inequity.

No match for the mother's tears, he'd moved on. Wandering, smeared in dirt, sweat and blood, he was becoming a spectral presence, a self-proclaimed pariah. He'd stopped attending Coltaine's nightly sessions, despite direct orders to the contrary. Accompanied only by List, he rode with the Wickans, to the flanks and to the rear, he marched with the Seventh, with the Hissari Loyals, the Marines, the sappers, the nobles and the mud-bloods – as the lowborn refugees had taken to calling themselves.

Through it all he said little, his presence becoming commonplace enough to permit a relaxation among the people around him. No matter what the depredations, there always seemed energy enough to expend in opinions.

Coltaine's a demon in truth, Laseen's dark joke on us all. He's in league with Kamist Reloe and Sha'ik – this uprising is naught but an elaborate charade since Hood's come to embrace the realm of humans. We've bowed to our skull-faced patron, and in return for all this spilled blood Coltaine, Sha'ik and Laseen will all ascend to stand alongside the Shrouded One.

Hood reveals himself in the flight of these capemoths – he shows his face again and again, greeting each dusk with a hungry grin in the dimming sky.

The Wickans have made a pact with the earth spirits. We're here to make fertile soil—

You've taken the wrong path with that, friend. We're sport for the Whirlwind goddess, nothing *more. We are a lesson drawn long in the telling.*

The Council of Nobles are eating children.

Where did you hear that?

Someone stumbled onto a grisly feast last night. The Council's petitioned dark Elder gods in order to stay fat—

To what?

Fat, I said. Truth. And now bestial spirits wander the camp at night, collecting children dead or near enough to dead to make no difference, except those ones are juicier.

You've gone mad—

He may have something there, friend! I myself saw picked and gnawed bones this morning, all in a heap – no skulls but the bones looked human enough, only very small. Wouldn't you do for a roasted baby right now, eh? Instead of the half-cup of brown sludge we're getting these days?

I heard Aren's army is only days away, led by Pormqual himself. He's got a legion of demons with him, too—

Sha'ik's dead – you heard the Semk wailing into the night, didn't you? And now they wear greased ash like a second skin. Someone in the Seventh told

me he came face to face with one at last night's ambush – the scrap at the dried-up waterhole. Said the Semk's eyes were black pits, dull as dusty stones, they were. Even when the soldier spitted the bastard on his sword, nothing showed in those eyes. I tell you, Sha'ik's dead.

Ubaryd's been liberated. We're going to swing south any day now – you'll see – it's the only thing that makes sense. There's nothing west of here. Nothing at all—

Nothing at all. . .

'Historian!'

That harsh Falari-accented shout came from the dust-covered rider angling his mount alongside Duiker. Captain Lull, Cartheron Wing, his long, red hair hanging in greasy strands from under his helmet. The historian blinked at him.

The grizzled soldier grinned. 'Word is, you've lost your way, old man.'

Duiker shook his head. 'I follow the train,' he said woodenly, wiping at the grit that stung his eyes.

'We've got a Tithansi warleader out there needs to be found, hunted down,' Lull said, eyes narrow on the historian. 'Sormo and Bult have volunteered some names for the task.'

'I shall dutifully record them in my List of the Fallen.'

The breath hissed between the captain's teeth. 'Abyss Below, old man, they ain't dead yet – *we* ain't dead yet, dammit! Anyway, I'm here to inform you that you've volunteered. We head out tonight, tenth bell. Gathering at Nil's hearth by the ninth.'

'I decline the offer,' Duiker said.

Lull's grin returned. 'Request denied, and I'm to stay at your side so you don't slip away as you're wont to do.'

'Hood take you, bastard!'

'Aye, soon enough.'

Nine days to the River P'atha. We stretch to meet each minor goal, there's a genius in this. Coltaine offers the marginally possible to fool us into achieving the impossible. All the way to Aren. But for all his ambition, we shall fail. Fail in the flesh and the bone. 'We kill the warleader, another will step into his place,' Duiker said after a time.

'Probably not as talented nor as brave as the task demands. A part of him will know: if his efforts are mediocre, we're likely to let him live. If he shows us brilliance, we'll kill him.'

Ah, that rings of Coltaine. His well-aimed arrows of fear and uncertainty. He's yet *to miss the mark. So long as he does not fail, he* cannot *fail. The day he slips up, shows imperfection, is the day our heads will roll. Nine days to fresh water. Kill the Tithansi war-leader and we'll get there. Make them reel with every victory, let them draw breath with every loss – Coltaine trains them as he would beasts, and they don't even realize it.*

Captain Lull leaned over the saddlehorn. 'Corporal List, you awake?'

The young man's head swung up and turned from side to side.

'Damn you, Historian,' Lull growled. 'The lad's fevered from lack of water.'

Looking at the corporal, Duiker saw the high colour beneath the dust streaks on List's drawn cheeks, his all too bright eyes. 'He wasn't like that this morning—'

'Eleven hours ago!'

Eleven?

The captain twisted his horse away, his shouts for a healer breaking through the incessant rumble of hooves, wagon wheels and countless footfalls which made up the train's unceasing roar.

Eleven?

Animals shifted position in the clouds of dust. Lull returned, alongside him Nether, the girl looking tiny atop the huge, muscular roan she rode. The

captain collected the reins of List's horse and passed them over to Nether. Duiker watched the Wickan child lead the corporal away.

'I'm tempted to have her attend to you afterward,' Lull said. 'Hood's breath, man – when did you last take a sip of water?'

'What water?'

'We've casks left for the soldiers. You take a skin every morning, Historian, up where the wagons carrying the wounded are positioned. Each dusk you bring the skin back.'

'There's water in the stew, isn't there?'

'Milk and blood.'

'If there are casks left for the soldiers, what of everyone else?'

'Whatever they managed to carry with them from the Sekala River,' Lull said. 'We'll protect them, aye, but we'll not mother them. Water's become the currency, I hear, and the trading's fierce.'

'Children are dying.'

Lull nodded. 'That's a succinct summary of humankind, I'd say. Who needs tomes and volumes of history? Children are dying. The injustices of the world hide in those three words. Quote me, Duiker, and your work's done.'

The bastard's right. Economics, ethics, the games of the *gods – all within that single, tragic statement.* I'll *quote you, soldier. Be assured of that.* An *old sword, pitted and blunt and nicked, that cuts clean to the heart.* 'You humble me, Captain.'

Lull grunted, passing over a waterskin. 'A couple of mouthfuls. Don't push it or you'll choke.'

Duiker's smile was wry.

'I trust,' the captain continued, 'you've kept up on that List of the Fallen you mentioned.'

'No, I've ... stumbled of late, I'm afraid.'

Lull jerked a tight nod.

'How do we fare, Captain?'

'We're getting mauled. Badly. Close to twenty killed a day, twice that wounded. Vipers in the dust – they suddenly appear, arrows fly, a soldier dies. We send out a troop of Wickans in pursuit, they ride into an ambush. We send out another, we got a major tangle on our hands, leaving flanks open to either side. Refugees get cut down, drovers get skewered and we lose a few more animals – unless those Wickan dogs are around, that is, those are nasty beasts. Mind you, their numbers are dropping as well.'

'In other words, this can't go on much longer.'

Lull bared his teeth, a white gleam amidst his grey-shot red beard. 'That's why we're going for the warleader's head. When we reach the River P'atha, there'll be another full-scale battle. He ain't invited.'

'Another disputed crossing?'

'No, the river's ankle-deep and getting shallower as the season drags on. More likely on the other side – the trail winds through some rough country – we'll find trouble there. In any case, we either carve ourselves some breathing space then, or we're purple meat under the sun and it don't matter.'

The Wickan horns sounded.

'Ah,' Lull said, 'we're done. Get some rest, old man – we'll find us a spot in the Foolish Dog camp. I'll wake you with a meal in a few hours.'

'Lead on, Captain.'

Scrapping over something unrecognizable in the tall grasses, the pack of Wickan cattle-dogs paused to watch Duiker and Lull stride past at a distance of twenty or so paces. The historian frowned at the wiry, mottled beasts.

'Best not look them in the eye,' Lull said. 'You ain't Wickan and they know it.'

'I was just wondering what they're eating.'

'Not something you want to find out.'

'There's been a rumour about dug-up child graves ...'

'Like I said, you don't want to know, Historian.'

'Well, some of the tougher mud-bloods have been hiring themselves out to stand guard over those graves—'

'If they ain't got Wickan blood in that mud they'll regret it.'

The dogs resumed their snapping and bickering once the two men had moved past.

Hearthfires flickered in the camp ahead. A last line of defenders patrolled the perimeter of the round hide tents, old folk and youths, who revealed a silent, vaguely ominous watchfulness that matched that of the cattle-dogs as the two men strode into the Wickan enclave.

'I get a sense,' Duiker muttered, 'that the cause of protecting the refugees is cooling among these people ...'

The captain grimaced but said nothing.

They continued on, winding between the tent rows. Smoke hung heavy in the air, as did the smell of horse urine and boiled bones, the latter acrid yet strangely sweet. Duiker paused as they passed close to an old woman tending one such iron pot of bones. Whatever boiled in the pot wasn't entirely water. The woman was using a flat blade of wood to collect the thick bone fat and marrow that congealed on the surface, scraping it into an intestine to be later twisted and tied off into sausages.

The old woman noticed the historian and held up the wooden blade – as she would if offering it to a toddler to lick clean. Flecks of sage were visible in the fat – a herb Duiker had once loved but had come to despise, since it was one of the few native to the Odhan. He smiled and shook his head.

As he caught up with Lull, the captain said, 'You're known, old man. They say you walk in the spirit world. That old horsewife wouldn't offer food to just anybody – not me, that's for certain.'

The spirit world. Yes, I *walked there. Once. Never again.* 'See an old man in crusty rags...'

'And he's gods-touched, aye. Don't mock out loud – it might save your skin one day.'

Nil's hearth was unique among the others in sight in that it held no cooking pot, nor was it framed in drying racks bedecked with curing strips of meat. The burning dung within the small ring of stones was almost smokeless, revealing a naked, blue-tinged flame. The young warlock sat to one side of the hearth, his hands deftly pleating strips of leather into something like a whip.

Four of Lull's marines squatted nearby, each running through a last check of their weapons and armour. Their assault crossbows had been freshly blackened, then smeared in greasy dust to remove the gleam.

One glance told Duiker that these were hard soldiers, veterans, their movements economical, their preparations professional. Neither the man nor the three women were under thirty, and none spoke or looked up as their captain joined them.

Nil nodded to Duiker as the historian crouched down opposite him. 'It promises to be a cold night,' the boy said.

'Have you found the location of this warleader?'

'Not precisely. A general area. He may possess some minor wards against detection – once we get closer they will not avail him.'

'How do you hunt down someone distinguished only by his or her competence, Nil?'

The young warlock shrugged. 'He's left... other signs. We shall find him, that is certain. And then it is up to them—' He jerked his head towards the

marines. 'I have come to a realization, Historian, over these past months on this plain.'

'And that is?'

'The Malazan professional soldier is the deadliest weapon I know. Had Coltaine three armies instead of only three-fifths of one, he would end this rebellion before year's end. And with such finality that Seven Cities would never rise again. We could shatter Kamist Reloe now – if not for the refugees whom we are sworn to protect.'

Duiker nodded. There was truth enough in that.

The sounds of the camp were a muffled illusion of normality, an embrace from all sides that the historian found unsettling. He was losing the ability to relax, he bleakly realized. He picked up a small twig and tossed it towards the fire.

Nil's hand snapped it out of the air. 'Not this one,' he said.

Another young warlock arrived, his thin, bony arms ridged in hatch-marked scars from wrist to shoulder. He squatted down beside Nil and spat once into the fire.

There was no answering sizzle.

Nil straightened, tossing aside the cord of leather, and glanced over at Lull and his soldiers. They stood ready.

'Time?' Duiker asked.

'Yes.'

Nil and his fellow warlock led the group through the camp. Few of their clan kin looked their way, and it was a few minutes before Duiker realized that their seemingly casual indifference was deliberate, possibly some kind of culturally prescribed display of respect. Or *something else entirely. To look is to ghost-touch, after all.*

They reached the encampment's north edge. Fog wafted on the plain beyond the wicker barriers. Duiker frowned. 'They'll know it isn't natural,'

he muttered.

Lull grunted. 'We've a diversion planned, of course. Three squads of sappers are out there right now with sacks full of fun—'

He was interrupted by a detonation off to the northeast, followed by a pause in which faint screams wailed in the shrouded darkness. Then a rapid succession of explosions shattered the night air.

The fog swallowed the flashes, but Duiker recognized the distinctive crack of sharpers and thumping whoosh of flamers. More screams, then the swift thudding of horse hooves converging to the northeast.

'Now we let things settle,' Lull said.

Minutes passed, the distant screams fading. 'Has Bult finally managed to track down that captain of the sappers?' the historian eventually asked.

'Ain't seen his face at any of the jaw sessions, if that's what you mean. But he's around. Somewhere. Coltaine's finally accepted that the man's shy.'

'Shy?'

Lull shrugged. 'A joke, Historian. Remember those?'

Nil finally turned to face them.

'That's it,' the captain said. 'No more talking.'

Half a dozen Wickan guards pulled up the spikes anchoring one of the wicker barriers, then quietly lowered it flat. A thick hide was unrolled over it to mask the inevitable creaking of the party's passage.

The mist beyond was dissipating into patches. One such cloud drifted over, then settled around the group, keeping pace as they struck out onto the plain.

Duiker wished he'd asked more questions earlier. How far to the enemy camp's pickets? What was the plan for getting through them undiscovered? What was the fallback should things go awry? He laid a hand on the grip of the short sword at his hip, and was alarmed at how strange it felt – it had been a long time since he'd last used a weapon. Being *pulled from the front*

lines had been the Emperor's reward all those years ago. That and the various alchemies that keep me tottering on well past my prime. Gods, even the scars from that last horror have faded away! 'No-one who's grown up amidst scrolls and books can write of the world,' Kellanved had told him once, 'which is why I'm appointing you Imperial Historian, soldier.'

'Emperor, I cannot read or write.'

'An unsullied mind. Good. Toc the Elder will be teaching you over the next six months –he's another soldier with a brain. Six months, mind. No more than that.'

'Emperor, it seems to me that he would be better suited than I—'

'I've something else in store for him. Do as I say or I'll have you spiked on the city wall.'

Kellanved's sense of humour had been strange even at the best of times. Duiker recalled those learning sessions: he a soldier of thirty-odd years who'd been campaigning for over half that, seated alongside Toe's own son, a runt of a boy who always seemed to be suffering from a cold – the sleeves of his shirt were crusty with dried snot. It had taken longer than six months, but by then it was Toe the Younger doing the teaching.

The Emperor loved lessons in humility. So long as it was never thrown back at him. What happened to Toe the Elder, I wonder? Vanishing after the assassinations – I'd always imagined it as Laseen's doing . . . and Toe the Younger – he'd rejected a life amidst scrolls and books . . . now lost in the Genabackan campaign—

A gauntleted hand gripped the historian's shoulder and squeezed hard. Duiker focused on Lull's battered face, nodded. *Sorry. Mind wandering still, it seems.*

They had stopped. Ahead, vague through the mists, rose a spike-bristling ridge of packed earth. The glow of fires painted the fog orange beyond the earthwork perimeter.

Now what?

The two warlocks knelt in the grass five paces in front. Both had gone perfectly still.

They waited. Duiker heard muffled voices from the other side of the ridge, slowly passing from left to right, then fading as the Tithansi patrol continued on. Nil twisted around and gestured.

Crossbows cocked, the marines slipped forward. After a moment the historian followed.

A tunnel mouth had opened in the earth before the two warlocks. The soil steamed, the rocks and gravel popping with heat. It looked to have been clawed open by huge taloned hands – from below.

Duiker scowled. He hated tunnels. No, they *terrified* him. There was nothing rational in it – *wrong again. Tunnels collapse. People get buried alive. All perfectly reasonable, possible, probable, inevitable.*

Nil led the way, slithering down and out of sight. The other warlock quickly followed. Lull turned to the historian and gestured him forward.

Duiker shook his head.

The captain pointed at him, then pointed to the hole and mouthed Now.

Hissing a curse, the historian edged forward. As soon as he was within reach Lull's hand snapped out, gathering a handful of dusty telaba, and dragged Duiker to the tunnel mouth.

It took all his will not to shriek as the captain unceremoniously stuffed him down into the tunnel. He scrambled, clawed wildly. He felt his kicking heel connect with something in the air behind him. Lull's *jaw,* I *bet. Serves you right, bastard!* The rush of satisfaction helped. He scrabbled past the old flood silts and found himself cocooned in warm bedrock. Collapse was unlikely, he told himself, the thought almost a gibber. The tunnel continued to angle downward, the warm rock turning slippery, then wet. Nightmare visions of drowning replaced collapsing.

He hesitated until a sword point was pressed against the worn sole of his moccasin, then punched through to jab his flesh. Whimpering, Duiker

pulled himself foward.

The tunnel levelled out. It was filling with water, the rock bleeding from fissures on all sides. The historian sloshed through a cool stream as he slithered along. He paused, took a tentative sip, tasted iron and grit. But *drinkable.*

The level stretch went on and on. The stream deepened with alarming swiftness. Soaked and increasingly weighed down by his clothing, Duiker struggled on, exhausted, his muscles failing him. The sound of coughing and spitting behind him was all that kept him moving. *They're drowning back there, and I'm next!*

He reached the upward slope, clawed his way along through mud and sifting earth. A rough sphere of grey fog appeared ahead – he'd reached the mouth.

Hands gripped him and pulled him clear, rolling him to one side until he came to rest in a bed of sharp-bladed grasses. He lay quietly gasping, staring up at the mist's low ceiling above him. He was vaguely aware of the marines clambering out of the tunnel and forming a defensive cordon, breaths hissing, their weapons dripping muddy water. *Those crossbow cords will stretch, unless they've been soaked in oil and waxed. Of course they have – those soldiers aren't idiots. Plan for any eventuality, even swimming beneath a dusty plain. I once saw a fellow soldier find use for a fishing kit in a desert. What makes a Malazan soldier so dangerous? They're allowed to think.*

Duiker sat up.

Lull was communicating with his marines with elaborate hand gestures. They responded in kind, then edged out into the mists. Nil and the other warlock began snaking forward through the grass, towards the glow of a hearthfire that showed dull red through the fog.

Voices surrounded them, the harsh Tithan tongue spoken in low murmurs that cavorted alarmingly until Duiker was certain a squad stood but a pace behind him, calmly discussing where in his back to drive their spears. Whatever games the fog played with sound, the historian suspected that Nil

and his comrade had magically amplified the effect and they would soon be gambling their lives on that aural confusion.

Lull tapped Duiker's shoulder, waved him forward to where the warlocks had vanished. The fog pocket was impenetrable – he could see no farther than the stretch of an arm. Scowling, the historian dropped to his belly, sliding his sword scabbard around to the back of his hip and then began to worm his way forward to where Nil waited.

The hearthfire was big, the flames lurid through the veil of mist. Six Tithansi warriors stood or sat within sight, all seemingly bundled in furs. Their breaths plumed.

Peering at the scene beside Nil, Duiker could now see a thin patina of frost covering the ground. Chill air wafted over them with a wayward turn of the faint night wind.

The historian nudged the warlock, nodded at the frost and raised his brows questioningly.

Nil's response was the faintest of shrugs.

The warriors were waiting, red-painted hands stretched out towards the flames in an effort to stay warm. The scene was unchanged for another twenty breaths, then those seated or squatting all rose and with the others faced in one direction – to Duiker's left.

Two figures emerged into the firelight. The man in the lead was built like a bear, the comparison strengthened by the fur of that animal riding his broad shoulders. A single-bladed throwing axe jutted from each hip. His leather shirt was unlaced from the breastbone up, revealing solid muscles and thick, matted hair. The crimson slashes of paint on his cheeks announced him as a warleader, each slash denoting a recent victory. The multitude of freshly painted bands made plain the Malazans' ill fortune at his hands.

Behind this formidable creature was a Semk.

That's *one assumption obliterated.* Evidently the Semk tribe's avowed hatred of all who were not Semk had been set aside in obeisance to the

Whirlwind goddess. *Or, more accurately, to the destruction of Coltaine.*

The Semk was a squatter, more pugnacious-looking version of the Tithan warleader, hairy enough to dispense with the need for a bear fur. His only clothing was a hide loincloth and a brace of belts cinched tight over his stomach. The man was covered in greasy ash, his shaggy black hair hanging in thick threads, his beard knotted with finger-bone fetishes. The contemptuous sneer twisting his face had a permanence about it.

The last detail that revealed itself as the Semk stepped closer to the fire was the gut-stitching closing his mouth. Hood's *breath, the Semk take their vows of silence seriously!*

The air grew icy. Faint alarm whispered at the back of Duiker's mind and he reached out to nudge Nil yet again.

Before he could make contact with the warlock, crossbows snapped. Two quarrels jutted from the Tithan warleader's chest, while two other Tithan warriors grunted before pitching to the ground. A fifth quarrel sank deep in the Semk's shoulder.

The earth beneath the hearth erupted, flinging coals and burning wood skyward. A multilimbed, tar-skinned beast clambered free, loosing a bone-shivering scream. It plunged in among the remaining Tithansi, claws ripping through armour and flesh.

The warleader fell to his knees, staring dumbly down at the leather-finned quarrels buried in his chest. Blood sprayed as he coughed, convulsed, then toppled face down on the dusty ground.

A mistake – the wrong—

The Semk had torn the quarrel from his shoulder as if it was a carpenter's nail. The air around him swirled white. Dark eyes fixing on the earth spirit, he leapt to meet it.

Nil was motionless at the historian's side. Duiker twisted to shake him, and found the young warlock unconscious.

The other Wickan youth was on his feet, reeling back under an invisible sorcerous onslaught. Strips of flesh and blood flew from the warlock – in moments there was only bone and cartilage where his face had been. The sight of the boy's eyes bursting had Duiker spinning away.

Tithansi were converging from all sides. As he dragged Nil back, the historian saw Lull and one of his marines releasing quarrels at almost point-blank range into the Semk's back. A lance flew out of the darkness and skidded from the marine's chain-armoured back. Both soldiers wheeled, flinging away their crossbows and unsheathing long-knives to meet the first warriors to arrive.

The earth spirit was shrieking now, three of its limbs torn off its body and lying twitching on the ground. The Semk was silent mayhem, ignoring the quarrels in his back, closing again and again to batter the earth spirit. Cold poured in waves from the Semk – a cold Duiker recognized: *The Semk god – a piece of him survived, a piece of him commands one of his chosen warriors—*

Detonations erupted to the south. Sharpers. Screams filled the night. Malazan sappers were blasting a hole through the Tithansi lines. *And here I'd concluded this was a suicide mission.*

Duiker continued dragging Nil southward, towards the explosions, praying that the sappers wouldn't mistake him for an enemy.

Horses thundered nearby. Iron rang.

One of the marines was suddenly at his side. Blood sheathed one side of her face, but she flung away her sword and pulled the warlock from the historian's hands, hoisting the lad effortlessly over one shoulder. 'Pull out that damned sword and cover me!' she snarled, bolting forward.

Without a shield? Hood take us, you can't use a short sword without a shield! But the weapon was in his hand as if it had leapt free of its scabbard and into his palm of its own will. The tin-pitted iron blade looked pitifully short as he backed away in the marine's wake, the weapon held out before him.

His heels struck something soft and with a curse he stumbled and fell.

The marine glanced back. 'On your feet, dammit! Someone's after us!'

Duiker had tripped over a body, a Tithansi lancer who'd been dragged by his horse before the mangled mess of his left hand finally released the reins. A throwing star was buried deep in his neck. The historian blinked at that – *a Claw's weapon, that star* – as he scrambled to his feet. *More unseen back-up?* Sounds of battle echoed through the mists, as if a full-scale engagement was underway.

Duiker resumed covering the marine as she continued on, Nil's limp body hanging like a sack of turnips over one shoulder.

A moment later three Tithansi warriors plunged out of the fog, tulwars swinging.

Decades-old training saved the historian from their initial onslaught. He ducked low and closed with the warrior on his right, grunting as the man's leather-wrapped forearm cracked down on his left shoulder, then gasping as the tulwar it held whipped down – the Tithansi bending his wrist – and chopped deep into Duiker's left buttock. Even as the pain jolted through him, he'd driven his short sword up and under the warrior's ribcage, piercing his heart.

Tearing the blade free, the historian jumped right. There was a falling body between him and the two remaining warriors, both of whom had the added disadvantage of being right-handed. The slashing tulwars missed Duiker by an arm's length.

The nearest weapon had been swung with enough force to drive it into the ground. The historian stamped a boot down hard on the flat of the blade, springing the tulwar from the Tithan's hand. Duiker followed up with a savage chop between the man's shoulder and neck, snapping through the collarbone.

He launched himself behind the reeling warrior's back to challenge the third Tithan, only to see the man face down on the ground, a silver-

pommelled throwing knife jutting from between his shoulder blades. A *Chw's sticker – I'd recognize it anywhere!*

The historian paused, glared around, but could see no-one. The mists swirled thick, smelling of ash. A hiss from the marine brought him around. She crouched at the inside edge of the picket trench, gesturing him forward.

Suddenly soaked with sweat and shivering, Duiker quickly joined her.

The woman grinned. 'That was damned impressive sword-play, old man, though I couldn't make out how you done the last one.'

'You saw no-one else?'

'Huh?'

Struggling to draw breath, Duiker only shook his head. He glanced down to where Nil lay motionless on the earthen bank. 'What's wrong with him?'

The marine shrugged. Her pale-blue eyes were still appraising the historian. 'We could use you in the ranks,' she said.

'What I've lost in speed I've made up in experience, and experience tells me not to get into messes like this one. Not an old man's game, soldier.'

She grimaced, but with good humour, 'Nor an old woman's. Come on, the scrap's swung east – we shouldn't have any trouble crossing the trench.' She lifted Nil back onto her shoulder with ease.

'You nailed the wrong man, you know ...'

'Aye, we'd guessed as much. That Semk was possessed, wasn't he?'

They reached the slope and picked their way carefully through the spikes studding the earth. Tents were burning in the Tithansi camp, adding smoke to the fog. Screams and the clash of weapons still echoed in the distance.

Duiker asked, 'Did you see anyone else get out?'

She shook her head.

They came upon a score of bodies, a Tithansi patrol who'd been hit with a sharper. The grenado's slivers of iron had ripped through them with horrific

efficiency. Blood trails indicated the recent departure of survivors.

The fog quickly thinned as they approached the Wickan lines. A troop of Foolish Dog lancers who had been patrolling the wicker barriers spotted them and rode up.

Their eyes fixed on Nil.

The marine said, 'He lives, but you'd better find Sormo.'

Two riders peeled off, cantered back to the camp.

'Any news of the other marines?' Duiker asked the nearest horsewarrior.

The Wickan nodded. 'The captain and one other made it.'

A squad of sappers emerged from the mists in a desultory dog-trot that slowed to a walk as soon as they saw the group. 'Two sharpers,' one was saying, disbelief souring his voice, 'and the bastard just got back up.'

Duiker stepped forward. 'Who, soldier?'

'That hairy Semk—'

'Ain't hairy no more,' another sapper threw in.

'We were the mop-up mission,' the first man said, showing a red-stained grin. 'Coltaine's axe – you were the edge, we were the wedge. We hammered that ogre but it done no good—'

'Sarge took an arrow,' said the other sapper. 'His lung's bleeding—'

'Just one of them and it's a pinprick,' the sergeant corrected, pausing to spit. 'The other one's fine.'

'Can't breathe blood, Sarge—'

'I shared a tent with you, lad – I've breathed worse.'

The squad continued on, arguing over whether or not the sergeant should go find a healer. The marine stared after them, shaking her head. Then she turned to the historian. 'I'll leave you to talk with Sormo, sir, if that's all right.'

Duiker nodded. 'Two of your friends didn't make it back—'

'But one did. Next time for sword practice, I'll come looking for you, sir.'

'My joints are already seizing, soldier. You'll have to prop me up.'

She gently lowered Nil to the grass, then moved off.

Ten *years younger, I'd have the nerve to ask her . . . well, never mind. Imagine the arguments at the cooking fire . . .*

The two Wickan riders returned, flanking a travois harnessed to a brutal-looking cattle-dog. A hoof had connected with its head some time in its past, and the bones had healed lopsided, giving the animal a manic half-snarl that seemed well suited to the vicious gleam in its eyes.

The riders dismounted and carefully laid Nil on the travois. Disdaining its escort, the dog moved off, back towards the Wickan encampment.

'That was one ugly beast,' Captain Lull said behind the historian.

Duiker grunted. 'Proof that their skulls are all bone and no brain.'

'Still lost, old man?'

The historian scowled. 'Why didn't you tell me we had hidden help, Captain? Who were they, Pormqual's?'

'What in Hood's name are you talking about?'

He turned. 'The Claw. *Someone* was covering our retreat. Using stars and stickers and moving unseen like a Hood-damned breath on my back!'

Lull's eyes widened.

'How many more *details* is Coltaine keeping to himself?'

'There's no way Coltaine knows anything about this, Duiker,' Lull said, shaking his head. 'If you're certain of what you saw – and I believe you – then the Fist will want to know. Now.'

For the first time that Duiker could recall, Coltaine looked rattled. He stood perfectly still, as if suddenly unsure that no-one hovered behind him, invisible blades but moments from their killing thrust.

Bult growled low in his throat. 'The heat's got you addled, Historian.'

'I know what I saw, Uncle. More, I know what I *felt.'*

There was a long silence, the air in the tent stifling and still.

Sormo entered, stopping just inside the entrance as Coltaine pinned him with a glare. The warlock's shoulders were slumped, as if no longer able to bear the weight they had carried all these months. Shadows pouched his eyes with fatigue.

'Coltaine has some questions for you,' Bult said to him. 'Later.'

The young man shrugged. 'Nil has awakened. I have answers.'

'Different questions,' the scarred veteran said with a dark, humourless grin.

Coltaine spoke. 'Explain what happened, Warlock.'

'The Semk god isn't dead,' Duiker said.

'I'd second that opinion,' Lull muttered from where he sat on a camp saddle-chair, his unbuckled vambraces in his lap, his legs stretched out. He met the historian's eyes and winked.

'Not precisely,' Sormo corrected. He hesitated, drew a deep breath, then continued. 'The Semk god was indeed destroyed. Torn to pieces and devoured. Sometimes, a piece of flesh can contain such malevolence that it corrupts the devourer—'

Duiker sat forward, wincing at the pain from the force-healed wound in his backside. 'An earth spirit—'

'A spirit of the land, aye. Hidden ambition and sudden power. The other spirits... suspected naught.'

Bult's face twisted in disgust. 'We lost seventeen soldiers tonight just to kill a handful of Tithan warchiefs and unmask a rogue spirit?'

The historian flinched. It was the first time he'd heard the full count of losses. *Coltaine's first failure. If Oponn smiles on us, the enemy won't realize it.*

'With such knowledge,' Sormo explained quietly, 'future lives will be saved. The spirits are greatly distressed – they were perplexed at being unable to detect the raids and ambushes, and now they know why. They did not think to look among their own kin. Now they will deliver their own justice, in their own time—'

'Meaning the raids continue?' The veteran looked ready to spit. 'Will your spirit allies be able to warn us now – as they once did so effectively?'

'The rogue's efforts will be blunted.'

'Sormo,' Duiker said, 'why was the Semk's mouth sewn shut?'

The warlock half smiled. 'That creature is sewn shut everywhere, Historian. Lest that which was devoured escapes.'

Duiker shook his head. 'Strange magic, this.'

Sormo nodded. 'Ancient,' he said. 'Sorcery of guts and bone. We struggle with knowledge we once possessed instinctively.' He sighed. 'From a time before warrens, when magic was found *within.'*

A year ago Duiker would have been galvanized with curiosity and excitement at such comments, and would have relentlessly interrogated the warlock without surcease. Now, Sormo's words were a dull echo lost in the vast cavern of the historian's exhaustion. He wanted nothing but sleep, and knew it would be denied him for another twelve hours – the camp outside was already stirring, even though another hour of darkness remained.

'If that's the case,' Lull drawled, 'why didn't that Semk burst apart like a bloated bladder when we pricked him?'

'What was devoured hides deep. Tell me, was this possessed Semk's stomach shielded?'

Duiker grunted. 'Belts, thick leather.'

'Just so.'

'What happened to Nil?'

'Caught unawares, he made use of that very knowledge we struggle to recall. As the sorcerous attack came, he retreated within himself. The attack pursued but he remained elusive, until the malevolent power spent itself. We learn.'

Into Duiker's mind arose the image of the other warlock's horrific death. 'At a cost.'

Sormo said nothing, but pain revealed itself for a moment in his eyes.

'We increase our pace,' Coltaine announced. 'One less mouthful of water for each soldier each day—'

Duiker straightened. 'But we have water.'

All eyes turned to him. The historian smiled wryly at Sormo. 'I understand Nil's report was rather ... dry. The spirits made for us a tunnel through the bedrock. As the Captain can confirm, the rock weeps.'

Lull grinned. 'Hood's breath, the old man's right!'

Sormo was staring at the historian with wide eyes. 'For lack of asking the right questions, we have suffered long – and needlessly.'

A new energy infused Coltaine, culminating in a taut baring of his teeth. 'You have one hour,' the Fist told the warlock, 'to ease a hundred thousand throats.'

From bedrock that split the prairie soil in weathered out-croppings, sweet tears seeped forth. Vast pits had been excavated. The air was alive with joyous songs and the blessed silence of beasts no longer crying their distress. And beneath it all was a warm, startling undercurrent. For once, the spirits of the land were delivering a gift untouched by death. Their

pleasure was palpable to Duiker's senses as he stood close to the north edge of the encampment, watching, listening.

Corporal List was at his side, his fever abated. 'The seepage is deliberately slow but not slow enough – stomachs will rebel – the reckless ones could end up killing themselves...'

'Aye. A few might.'

Duiker raised his head, scanning the valley's north ridge. A row of Tithansi horsewarriors lined its length, watching in what the historian imagined was fearful wonder. He had no doubt that Kamist Reloe's army was suffering, even though they had the advantage of seizing and holding every known waterhole on the Odhan.

As he studied them, his eyes caught a flash of white that flowed down the valleyside, then vanished beyond Duiker's line of sight. He grunted.

'Did you see something, sir?'

'Just some wild goats,' the historian said. 'Switching sides...'

The blowing sand had bored holes into the mesa's sides, an onslaught that began by sculpting hollows, then caves, then tunnels, finally passages that might well exit out of the other side. Like voracious worms ravaging old wood, the wind devoured the cliff face, hole after hole appearing, the walls between them thinning, some collapsing, the tunnels widening. The mantle of the plateau remained, however, a vast cap of stone perched on ever-dwindling foundations.

Kulp had never seen anything like it. *As if the Whirlwind's deliberately attacked it. Why lay siege to a rock?*

The tunnels shrieked with the wind, each one with its own febrile pitch, creating a fierce chorus. The sand was fine as dust where it spun and swirled on updraughts at the base of the cliff. Kulp glanced back to where Heboric and Felisin waited – two vague shapes huddled against the ceaseless fury of the storm.

The Whirlwind had denied them all shelter for three days now, ever since it had first descended upon them. The wind assailed them from every direction – *as if the mad goddess has singled us out.* The possibility was not as unlikely as it first seemed. The malevolent will was palpable. *We're intruders, after all. The Whirlwind's focus of hate has always been on those who do not belong. Poor Malazan Empire, to have stepped into such a ready-made mythos of rebellion ...*

The mage scrambled back to the others. He had to lean close to be heard above the endless roar. 'There's caves! Only the wind's plunging down their throats – I suspect it's cut right through the hill!'

Heboric was shivering, beset since morning by a fever born of exhaustion. He was weakening fast. *We all are.* It was almost dusk – the unrelieved ochre dimming over their heads – and the mage estimated they had travelled little more than a league in the past twelve hours.

They had no water, no food. Hood stalked their heels.

Felisin clutched Kulp's tattered cloak, pulling him closer. Her lips were split, sand gumming the corners of her mouth. 'We try anyway!' she said.

'I don't know. That whole hill could come down—'

'The caves! We go into the caves!'

Die out here, or die in there. At least the caves offer us a tomb for our corpses. He gave a sharp nod.

They half dragged Heboric between them. The cliff offered them a score of options with its ragged, honeycombed visage. They made no effort to select one, simply plunging into the first cave mouth they came to, a wide, strangely flattened tunnel that seemed to run level – at least for the first few paces.

The wind was a hand at their backs, dismissive of hesitation in its unceasing pressure. Darkness swept around them as they staggered on, within a cauldron of screams.

The floor had been sculpted into ridges, making walking difficult. Fifteen paces on, they stumbled into an outcropping of quartzite or some other crystalline mineral that resisted the erosive wind. They worked their way around it and found in its lee the first surcease from the Whirlwind's battering force in over seventy hours.

Heboric sagged in their arms. They set him down in the ankle-deep dust at the base of the outcropping. 'I'd like to scout ahead,' Kulp told Felisin, yelling to be heard.

She nodded, lowering herself to her knees.

Another thirty paces took the mage to a larger cavern. More quartzite filled the space, reflecting a faint luminescence from what appeared to be a ceiling of crushed glass fifteen feet above him. The quartzite rose in vertical veins, the gleaming pillars creating a gallery effect of startling beauty, despite the racing wind's dust-filled stream. Kulp strode forward. The piercing shriek dimmed, losing itself in the vastness of the cavern.

Closer to the centre of the cavern rose a heap of tumbled stones, their shapes too regular to be natural. The glittering substance of the ceiling covered them in places – a single side of their vaguely rectangular forms, the mage realized after a moment's examination. Crouching, he ran a hand along one such side, then bent still lower. *Hood's breath, it's glass in truth! Multicoloured, crushed and compacted ...*

He looked up. A large hole gaped in the ceiling, its edges glowing with that odd, cool light. Kulp hesitated, then opened his warren. He grunted. Nothing. Queen's *blessing, no sorcery – it's mundane.*

Hunching low against the wind, the mage made his way back to the others. He found them both asleep or unconscious. Kulp studied them, feeling a chill at the composed finality he saw in their dehydrated features.

Might *be more merciful not to awaken them.*

As if sensing his presence, Felisin opened her eyes. They filled with instant awareness. 'You'll never have it that easy,' she said.

'This hill's a buried city, and we're under what's buried.'

'So?'

'The wind's got into one chamber at least, emptied it of sand.'

'Our tomb.'

'Maybe.'

'All right, let's go.'

'One problem,' Kulp said, not moving. 'The way in is about fifteen feet over our heads. There's a pillar of quartzite, but it wouldn't be an easy climb, especially not in our condition.'

'Do your warren trick.'

'What?'

'Open a gate.'

He stared at her. 'It's not that simple.'

'Dying's simple.'

He blinked. 'Let's get the old man on his feet, then.'

Heboric's eyes were blistered shut, weeping grit-filled tears. Slow to awaken, he clearly had no idea where he was. His wide mouth split into a ghastly smile. 'They tried it here, didn't they?' he asked, tilting his head as they helped him forward. 'Tried it and paid for it, oh, the memories of water, all those wasted lives ...'

They arrived at the place of the breached ceiling. Felisin laid a hand on the quartzite column nearest the hole. 'I'd have to climb this like a Dosii does a coconut palm.'

'And how's that done?' Kulp asked.

'Reluctantly,' Heboric muttered, cocking his head as if hearing voices.

Felisin glanced at the mage. 'I'll need those straps from your belt.'

With a grunt, Kulp began removing the leather band at his waist. 'Damned strange time to be wanting to see me without my breeches, lass.'

'We can all do with the laugh,' she replied.

He handed her the belt, and watched as she affixed the binding strips at each end to her ankles. He winced at how savagely she tightened the knots.

'Now, what's left of your raincloak, please.'

'What's wrong with your tunic?'

'No-one gets to ogle my breasts – not for free, anyway. Besides, that cloak's a tougher weave.'

'There was retribution,' Heboric said. 'A methodical, dispassionate cleaning-up of the mess.'

As he pulled off his sand-scoured cloak, Kulp scowled down at the ex-priest. 'What are you going on about, Heboric?'

'First Empire, the city above. They came and put things aright. Immortal custodians. Such a debacle! Even with my eyes closed I can see my hands – they're groping blind, so blind now. So empty.' He sank down, suddenly racked with shuddering grief.

'Never mind him,' Felisin said, stepping up as if to embrace the jagged pillar. 'The old toad's lost his god and it's broken his mind.'

Kulp said nothing.

Felisin reached around the column and linked her hands on the other side by gripping two ends of the cloak and twisting them taut. The belt between her feet hugged this side of the pillar.

'Ah,' Kulp said. 'I see. Clever Dosii.'

She hitched the cloak as high as she could on the opposite side, then leaned back and, in a jerking motion, jumped a short distance upward – knees drawn up, the belt snapping against the pillar. He saw the pain rip through her as the bindings dug into her ankles.

'I'm surprised the Dosii have feet,' Kulp said.

Gasping, she said, 'Guess I got some minor detail wrong.'

In all truth, the mage did not think she would make it. Before she had gone two arm-spans – a full body's length from the ceiling – her ankles streamed blood. She trembled all over, using unimagined but quickly waning reserves of energy. Yet she did not stop. *This is a hard, hard creature. She surpasses us all, again and again.* The thought led him to Baudin – banished, likely to be somewhere out there, suffering the storm. *Another hard one, stubborn and stolid. How fare you, Talon?*

Felisin finally came to within reach of the hole's ragged edge. And there she hesitated.

Aye, now what?

'Kulp!' Her voice bounced in an eerie echo that was quickly swept away by the wind.

'Yes?'

'How close are my feet to you?'

'Maybe three arm-spans. Why?'

'Prop Heboric beside the pillar. Climb onto his shoulders—'

'In Hood's name what for?'

'You've got to reach my ankles, then climb over me – I can't let go – nothing left!'

Gods, I'm not as hard as you, lass. 'I think—'

'Do it! We have no choice, damn you!'

Hissing, Kulp swung to Heboric. 'Old man, can you understand me? Heboric!'

The ex-priest straightened, grinned. 'Remember the hand of stone? The finger? The past is an alien world. Powers unimagined. To touch is to recall someone else's memories, someone so unlike you in thought and senses that they beckon you into madness.'

Hand of stone? The bastard's raving. 'I need to climb onto your shoulders, Heboric. You need to stand firm – once we get up we'll rig a harness to pull you up, OK?'

'On my shoulders. A mountain of stone, each one carved and shaped by a life long since lost to Hood. How many yearnings, desires, secrets? Where does it all go? The unseen energy of life's thoughts is food for the gods, did you know that? This is why they must – they *must* – be fickle!'

'Mage!' Felisin wailed. 'Now!'

Kulp stepped behind the ex-priest and set his hands on Heboric's shoulders. 'Stand steady now—'

Instead, the old man turned to face him. He brought both wrists together, leaving a space between them where hands should be. 'Step. I'll launch you straight to her.'

'Heboric – you've no hands to hold my foot—'

The man's grin broadened. 'Humour me.'

Something pushed Kulp beyond wonder as his moccasined foot settled into the firm stirrup of interlaced fingers he could not see. He placed his hands on the ex-priest's shoulders once again.

'Straight up you'll go,' Heboric said. 'I'm blind. Position me, Mage.'

'Back a step, a little more. There.'

'Ready?'

'Aye.'

But he wasn't prepared for the immense surge of strength that lifted him, flung him effortlessly straight up. Kulp made an instinctive grab for Felisin, missed – luckily, as he was then past her, through the ceiling's hole. He almost fell straight back down. A panicked twisting of his upper body, however, landed him painfully on an edge. It groaned, sagged.

His fingers clawing unseen flagstones, the mage clambered onto the floor.

Felisin's voice keened from below. 'Mage! Where are you?' Feeling a slightly hysterical grin frozen on his face, Kulp said, 'Up here. I'll have you in a moment, lass.'

Heboric used his invisible hands to swiftly climb the makeshift rope of leather and cloth that Kulp sent snaking down ten minutes later. Seated nearby in the small, gloomy chamber, Felisin silently watched with fear racing unchecked within her.

Her body tortured her with pain, the feeling returning to her feet with silent outrage. Fine white dust coated the blood on her ankles and where the pillar's crystalline edges had scored her wrists. She shook uncontrollably. *That old man looked dead on his feet. Dead. He was burning up, yet his ravings were not just empty words. There was knowing in them, impossible knowing. And now his ghost-hands have become real.*

She glanced over at Kulp. The mage was frowning at the torn shambles of the raincloak in his hands. Then he sighed and swung his gaze to a silent study of Heboric, who seemed to be sinking back into his fevered stupor.

Kulp had conjured a faint glow to the chamber, revealing bare stone walls. Saddled steps rose along one wall to a solid-looking door. At the base of the wall opposite, round indentations ran in a row on the floor, each of a size to fit a cask or keg. Rust-pitted hooks depended on chains from the ceiling at the room's far end. Everything seemed blunted to Felisin's eyes; either it was strangely worn down or the effect was a product of the mage's sorcerous light.

She shook her head, wrapping her arms around herself to fight the trembling.

'That was some climb you managed, lass,' Kulp said.

She grunted. 'And pointless, as it turns out.' And *now it's likely to kill me. There was more to making that climb than just muscle and bone. I feel . . . emptied, with nothing left in me to rebuild.* She laughed.

'What?'

'We've found a cellar for a tomb.'

'I ain't ready to die yet.'

'Lucky you.'

She watched him totter to his feet. He looked around. 'This room was flooded once. With water that flowed.'

'From where to where?'

He shrugged and approached the stairs in a slow, laboured shuffle.

He looks a century old. As old as I *feel. Together, we can't make up even one Heboric. I'm learning to appreciate irony, at least.*

After some minutes Kulp finally reached the door. He laid a hand against it. 'Bronze sheeting – I can feel the hammer strokes that flattened it.' He rapped a knuckle on the dark metal. The sound that came was a rustling, sifting whisper. 'Wood's rotted behind it.'

The latch broke in his hand. The mage muttered a curse, then set his weight against the door and pushed.

The bronze cracked, crumpled inward. A moment later the door fell back, taking Kulp with it in a cloud of dust.

'Barriers are never as solid as one thinks,' Heboric said as the echoes of that crash faded. He stood holding his stubbed arms out before him. 'I understand this now. To a blind man his entire body is a ghost. Felt but not seen. Thus, I raise invisible arms, move invisible legs, my invisible chest rising and falling to unseen air. So now I stretch fingers, then make fists. I am everywhere solid – and always have been – if not for the deceit perpetrated by my own eyes.'

Felisin looked away from the ex-priest. 'Maybe if I go deaf you'll disappear.'

Heboric laughed.

At the landing, Kulp was making moaning sounds, his breath oddly harsh and laboured. She pushed herself upright, stumbling as pain closed iron

bands around her ankles. Gritting her teeth, she hobbled to the stairs.

The eleven steps left her reeling with exhaustion. She fell to her knees beside the mage and waited a long minute before her breathing steadied. 'You all right?'

Kulp lifted his head. 'Broke my damned nose, I think.'

'From that new accent I'd say you were right. I take it you'll live, then.'

'Loudly.' He rose to his hands and knees, thick blood hang' ing in dusty threads from his face. 'See what's ahead? Ain't had a chance to look, yet.'

'It's dark. The air smells.'

'Like what?'

She shrugged. 'Not sure. Lime? As in limestone, that is.'

'Not bitter fruit? I'm surprised.'

Shuffling steps on the stairs indicated Heboric's approach.

A glow rose ahead, raising vague highlights that slowly etched a scene. Felisin stared.

'Your breath's quickened, lass,' Kulp said, still unwilling or unable to lift his head. 'Tell me what you're seeing.'

Heboric's voice echoed from halfway up the stairs: 'Remnants of a ritual gone awry is what she's seeing. Frozen memories of ancient pathos.'

'Sculptures,' Felisin said. 'Sprawled all over the floor – it's a big room. Very big – the light doesn't reach the far end—'

'Wait, you said sculptures? What kind?'

'People. Carved as if lying around – at first I thought they were real—'

'And why don't you think that any more?'

'Well...' Felisin crawled forward. The nearest one was a dozen paces away, a nude woman of advanced years, lying on her side as if dead or sleeping. The stone she had been fashioned from was dull white, limned and mottled

with mould. Every wrinkle of her withered body had been artfully rendered, no detail left out. She looked down on the peaceful, aged face. *Lady Gaesen – this woman could be her sister.* She reached out.

'Don't touch anything, mind,' Kulp said. 'I'm still seeing stars, but I've got raised hackles that says there's sorcery in that chamber.'

Felisin withdrew her hand, sat back. 'They're just statues—'

'On pedestals?'

'Well, no, just on the floor.'

The light suddenly brightened, filling the chamber. Felisin looked back to see Kulp on his feet, leaning against the crumbled door frame. The mage was blinking myopically as he took in the scene. 'Sculptures, lass?' he growled. 'Not a chance. A warren's ripped through here.'

'Some gates should never be opened,' Heboric said, blithely stepping past the mage. He walked unerringly to Felisin's side, where he stopped, cocking his head and smiling. 'Her daughter chose the Path of the Soletaken, a fraught journey, that. She was hardly unique, the twisted route was a popular alternative to Ascension. More ... earthly, they claimed. And older, and that which was old was in high favour in the last days of the First Empire.' The ex-priest paused, sudden sorrow crumpling his features. 'It was understandable that Elders of the day sought to ease their children's chosen path. Sought to create a new version of the old, risk-laden one – for that had crumbled, weakened, was cancerous. Too many of the Empire's young were being lost – and never mind the wars to the west—'

Kulp had laid a hand on Heboric's shoulder. It was as if the touch closed a valve. The ex-priest raised a ghost-hand to his face, then sighed. 'Too easy to become lost...'

'We need water,' the mage said. 'Does her memory hold such knowledge?'

'This was a city of springs, fountains, baths and canals.'

'Probably filled with sand one and all,' Felisin said.

'Maybe not,' Kulp said, glancing around with bloodshot eyes. The break in his nose was a bad one, the swelling cracking the too dry skin on either side. 'This one's been emptied out recently – feel how the air still stirs.'

Felisin eyed the woman at her feet. 'She was once real, then. Flesh.'

'Aye, they all were.'

'Alchemies that slowed ageing,' Heboric said. 'Six, seven centuries for each citizen. The ritual killed them, yet the alchemies remained potent—'

'Then water deluged the city,' Kulp said. 'Mineral-rich.'

'Turning not just bone to stone, but flesh as well.' Heboric shrugged. 'The flood was born of distant events – the immortal custodians had already come and gone.'

'What immortal custodians, old man?'

'There may yet be a spring,' the ex-priest said. 'Not far.'

'Lead on, blind man,' Felisin said.

'I've got more questions,' Kulp said.

Heboric smiled. 'Later. Our immediate journey shall explain much.'

The chamber's mineralized occupants were all elderly, and numbered in the hundreds. Their deaths appeared to be, one and all, peaceful ones, which had a vaguely disquieting effect on Felisin. Not *all ends are tortured. Hood's indifferent to the means. So the priests claim, anyway. Yet his greatest harvests come from war, disease and famine. Those countless ages of deliverance must surely have marked the High King of Death. Disorder crowds his Gates and there's a flavour to that. Quiet genocide must ring very different bells.*

She felt Hood was with her now, in these hours and those since their return to this world. She found herself musing on him as if he was her lover, driven deep inside her with a claim that felt permanent and oddly reassuring.

And now, I fear only Heboric and Kulp. It's said gods fear mortals more than they do each other. Is that the source of my terror? Have I captured an echo of Hood within me? The god of death must surely dream rivers of blood. Perhaps I have been his all this time.

Thus I am blessed.

Heboric turned suddenly, seeming to regard her with his sunburned, swollen-shut eyes.

Can you now read my mind, old man?

Heboric's broad mouth twisted wryly. After a moment he swung back, continued on.

The chamber ended in a portalway that funnelled their path into a low-ceilinged tunnel. Past torrents of water had smoothed and polished the heavy stones on every side. Kulp maintained the diffuse, sourceless light as they stumbled onward.

We shamble like animated corpses, cursed in a journey without end. Felisin smiled. *Hood's own.*

They came to what had once been a street, narrow and crooked, its cobbles heaved and buckled. Low residential buildings crowded the sides beneath a roof of crusted, compacted glass. Along all the walls in sight ran narrow bands of similar substance, as if marking water levels or layers in the sand that had once filled every space.

In the street lay more bodies, but there was no peace to be found in their twisted, malformed shapes. Heboric paused, cocking his head. 'Ah, now we come upon altogether different memories.'

Kulp crouched down beside a figure. 'Soletaken, caught in the act of veering. Into something ... reptilian.'

'Soletaken and D'ivers,' the ex-priest said. 'The ritual unleashed powers that ran wild. Like a plague, shapeshifting claimed thousands, unwelcomed, no initiation – many went mad. Death filled the city, every street, every

house. Families were torn apart by their own.' He shook himself. 'All within but a handful of hours,' he whispered.

Kulp's eyes fixed on another figure, almost lost in the midst of a pile of mineralized corpses. 'Not just Soletaken and D'ivers...'

Heboric sighed. 'No.'

Felisin approached the subject of the mage's rapt attention. She saw thick, nut-brown limbs – an arm and a leg, still attached to an otherwise dismembered torso. Withered skin wrapped the thick bones. *I've seen this before. On the* Silanda. *T'lan Imass.*

'Your immortal custodians,' Kulp said.

'Aye.'

'They took losses here.'

'Oh, that they did,' Heboric said. 'Appalling losses. There is a bond between the T'lan Imass and Soletaken and D'ivers, a mysterious kinship that was unsuspected by the dwellers of this city – though they claimed for themselves the proud title of First Empire. That would have irritated the T'lan Imass – assuming such creatures can feel irritation – to have so boldly assumed a title that rightly belonged to them. Yet what drew them here was the ritual, and the need to set things right.'

Kulp was frowning behind the battered mask of his features. 'Our brushes with Soletaken ... and the Imass. What's beginning again, Heboric?'

'I don't know, Mage. A return to that ancient gate? Another unleashing?'

'That Soletaken dragon we followed ... it was undead.'

'It was T'lan Imass,' the ex-priest elaborated. 'A Bonecaster. Perhaps it is the old gate's custodian, drawn once again in answer to an impending calamity. Shall we move on? I can smell water – the spring we seek lives yet.'

The pool lay in the centre of a garden. Pale undergrowth carpeted the cracked flagstones on the footpath, white and pink leaves like shreds of flesh, colourless globes of some kind of fruit depending from vines wrapping stone columns and fossilized tree trunks. A garden thriving in darkness.

Eyeless white fish darted in the pool, seeking shadows as the sorcerous light pulsed bright.

Felisin fell to her knees, reached trembling hands down, slipped them into the cool water. The sensation rushed through her with ecstasy.

'Residue of alchemies,' Heboric said behind her.

She glanced back. 'What do you mean?'

'There will be .. . benefits ... in drinking this nectar.'

'Is this fruit edible?' Kulp asked, hefting one of the pale globes.

'It was when it was bright red, nine thousand years ago.'

The thick ash hung motionless in their wake for as far as Kalam could see, though distance in the Imperial Warren was not a thing easily gauged. Their trail had the appearance of being as straight as a spear shaft. His frown deepened.

'We *are* lost,' Minala said, leaning back in her saddle.

'Better than dead,' Keneb muttered, offering the assassin at least that much sympathy.

Kalam felt Minala's hard grey eyes on him. 'Get us out of this Hood-cursed warren, Corporal! We're hungry, we're thirsty, we don't know where we are. Get us out!'

I've visualized Aren, I've picked the place – an unobtrusive niche at the end of the final twist of No Help Alley . . . in the heart of Dregs, that Malazan expatriate hovel close to the riverfront. Right down to the cobbles underfoot. So why can't we get there? What's blocking us? 'Not yet,' Kalam

said. 'Even by warren, Aren is a long journey.' *That makes sense, doesn't it? So why all this unease?*

'Something's wrong,' Minala persisted. 'I can see it in your face. We should have arrived by now.'

The taste of ash, its smell, its feel, had become a part of him, and he knew it was the same for the others. The lifeless grit seemed to stain his very thoughts. Kalam had suspicions of what that ash had once been – the heap of bones they had stumbled onto when arriving had not proved unique – yet he found himself instinctively shying from acknowledging those suspicions. The possibility was too ghastly, too overwhelming, to contemplate.

Keneb grunted, then sighed. 'Well, Corporal, shall we continue on?'

Kalam glanced at the captain. The fever from his head wound was gone, though a barely perceptible slowness to his movements and expressions betrayed a healing yet incomplete. The assassin knew he could not count on the man in a fight. And with the apparent loss of Apt, he felt his back exposed. Minala's inability to trust him diminished the reliance he placed in her: she would do what was necessary to protect her sister and the children – that and nothing more.

Better were I *alone.* He nudged the stallion forward. After a moment the others followed.

The Imperial Warren was a realm with neither day nor night, just a perpetual dusk, its faint light sourceless – a place without shadows. They measured the passage of time by the cyclical demands imposed by their bodies. The need to eat and drink, the need to sleep. Yet, when gnawing hunger and thirst grew constant and unappeased, when exhaustion pulled at every step, the notion of time sank into meaninglessness; indeed, it revealed itself as something born of faith, not fact.

'Time makes of us believers. Timelessness *makes of us unbelievers.' Another Saying of the Fool, another sly quote voiced by the sages of my homeland. Used most often when dismissing precedent, a derisive scoff at the lessons of history. The central assertion of sages was to believe nothing.*

More, that assertion was a central tenet of those who would become assassins.

'Assassination proves the lie of constancy. Even as the upraised dagger is itself a constant, your freedom to choose who, to choose when, is the constant's *darker lie. An assassin is chaos unleashed, students. But remember, the upraised dagger can quench firestorms as easily as light them . . .'*

And there, plainly carved in his thoughts as if with a dagger-point, stretched the thin, straight track that would lead him to Laseen. Every justification he needed rode unerring within that fissure. *Yet, while the track cuts through Aren, it seems all unknowing something's nudged me from it, left me wandering this plain of ash.*

'I see clouds ahead,' Minala said, now riding beside him.

Ridges of low-hanging dust crisscrossed the area before them. Kalam's eyes narrowed. 'As good as footprints in mud,' he muttered.

'What?'

'Look behind us – we leave the selfsame trail. We've company in the Imperial Warren.'

'And any company's unwelcome,' she said.

'Aye.'

Arriving at the first of the ragged ruts only deepened Kalam's unease. More *than one. Bestial. No servants sworn to the Empress left these ...*

'Look,' Minala said, pointing.

Thirty paces ahead was what appeared to be a sinkhole or dark stain on the ground. Suspended ash rimmed the pit in a motionless, semi-translucent curtain.

'Is it just me,' Keneb growled behind them, 'or is there a new smell to this Hood-rotted air?'

'Like wood spice,' Minala agreed.

Hackles rising, Kalam freed his crossbow from its binding on the saddle, cranked the claw back until it locked, then slid a quarrel into the slot. He felt Minala's eyes on him throughout and was not surprised when she spoke.

'That particular smell's one you're familiar with, isn't it? And not from rifling some merchant's bolt-chest, either. What should we be on the lookout for, Corporal?'

'Anything,' he said, kicking his horse into a walk.

The pit was at least a hundred paces across, the edges heaped in places with excavated fill. Burned bone jutted from those mounds.

Kalam's stallion stopped a few yards from the edge. Still gripping the crossbow, the assassin lifted one leg over the saddlehorn, then slipped down, landing in a puff of grey cloud. 'Best stay here,' he told the others. 'No telling how firm the sides are.'

'Then why approach at all?' Minala demanded.

Not answering, Kalam edged forward. He came to within two paces of the rim, close enough to see what lay at the bottom of the pit, although at first it was the far side that held his attention. *Now I know what we're walking on and refusing to think on it didn't help at all. Hood's breath!* The ash formed compacted layers, revealing past variations in the temperature and ferocity of the fires that had incinerated this land – and everything on it. The layers varied in thickness as well. One of the thickest was an arm's length in depth and looked solid with compacted, shattered bone. Immediately below it was a thinner, reddish layer of what looked like brick dust. Other layers revealed only charred bones, mottled with black patches rimmed in white. Those few that he could identify looked human in size – perhaps slightly longer of limb. The banded wall opposite him was at least six arm-spans deep. We *stride ancient death, the remains of . . . millions.*

His gaze slowly descended to the pit's floor. It was crowded with rusted, corroded mechanisms, all alike though strewn about. Each was the size of a trader's wagon, and indeed huge spoked iron wheels were visible.

Kalam studied them a long time, then he swung about and returned to the others, uncocking the crossbow as he did so.

'Well?'

The assassin shrugged, pulling himself back into the saddle. 'Old ruins at the bottom. Odd ones – the only time I've seen anything like them was in Darujhistan, within the temple that housed Icarium's Circle of Seasons, which was said to measure the passage of time.'

Keneb grunted.

Kalam glanced at the man. 'Something, Captain?'

'A rumour, nothing more. Months old.'

'What rumour?'

'Oh, that Icarium was seen.' The man suddenly frowned. 'What do you know of the Deck of Dragons, Corporal?'

'Enough to stay away from it.'

Keneb nodded. 'We had a Seer pass through around that time – some of my squads chipped in for a reading, ended up getting their money back since the Seer couldn't take the field past the first card – the Seer wasn't surprised, I recall. Said that'd been the case for weeks, and not just for him, but for every other reader as well.'

Alas, that wasn't my luck the last time I saw a Deck. 'Which card?'

'One of the Unaligned I think it was. Which are those?'

'Orb, Throne, Sceptre, Obelisk—'

'Obelisk! That's the one. The Seer claimed it was Icarium's doing, that he'd been seen with his Trell companion in Pan'potsun.'

'Does any of this matter?' Minala demanded.

Obelisk . . . past, present, future. Time, and time has no allies ... 'Probably not,' the assassin replied.

They rode on, skirting the pit at a safe distance. More dust trails crossed their route, with only a few suggesting the passage of a human. Athough it was hard to be certain, they seemed to be heading in the opposite direction to the one Kalam had chosen. *If indeed we're travelling south, then the Soletaken and D'ivers are all travelling north. That might be reassuring, except that if there're more shapeshifters on the way, we'll run right into them.*

A thousand paces later, they came to a sunken road. Like the mechanisms in the pit, it was six arm-spans down. While dust filled the air above the cobbles, making them blurry, the steeply banked sides had not slumped. Kalam dismounted, tied a long, thin rope to his stallion's saddlehorn, then, gripping the rope's other end, began making his way down. To his surprise he did not sink into the bank. His boots crunched. The slope had been solidified somehow. Nor was it too steep for the horses.

The assassin glanced up at the others. 'This can lead us in the direction we've been travelling along, more or less. I suggest we take it – we'll make much better time.'

'Going nowhere faster,' Minala said.

Kalam grinned.

When everyone had led their mounts down, the captain spoke. 'Why not camp here for a while? We're not visible and the air's a bit cleaner.'

'And cooler,' Selv added, her arms around her all too quiet children.

'All right,' the assassin agreed.

The bladders of water for the horses were getting ominously light – the animals could last a few days on feed alone, Kalam knew, though they would suffer terribly. *We're running out of time.* As he unsaddled, fed and watered the horses, Minala and Keneb laid out the bedrolls, then assembled the meagre supplies that would make up their own meal. The preparations were conducted in silence.

'Can't say I'm encouraged by this place,' Keneb said as they ate.

Kalam grunted, appreciating the gradual emergence of the captain's sense of humour. 'Could do with a good sweeping,' he agreed.

'Aye. Mind you, I've seen bonfires get out of control before ...'

Minala took a last sip of water, set the bladder down. 'I'm done,' she announced, rising. 'You two can discuss the weather in peace.'

They watched her. stride to her bedroll. Selv repacked the remaining food, then led her children away as well.

'It's my watch,' Kalam reminded the captain.

'I'm not tired—'

The assassin barked a laugh.

'All right, I'm tired. We all are. Thing is, this dust has us all snoring so loud we'd drown out stags in heat. I end up just lying there, staring up at what should be sky but looks more like a shroud. Throat on fire, lungs aching like they were full of sludge, eyes drier than a forgotten luckstone. We won't get any decent sleep until we've cleared this place out of our bodies—'

'We have to get out of here first.'

Keneb nodded. He glanced over to where the snores had already begun and lowered his voice. 'Any predictions on when that will be, Corporal?'

'No.'

The captain was silent a long time, then he sighed. 'You've somehow crossed blades with Minala. That's an unwelcome tension to our little family, wouldn't you say?'

Kalam said nothing.

After a moment, Keneb continued. 'Colonel Tras wanted a quiet, obedient wife, a wife to perch on his arm and make pretty sounds—'

'Not very observant, was he?'

'More like stubborn. Any horse can be broken, was his philosophy. And that's what he set about doing.'

'Was the colonel a subtle man?'

'Not even a clever one.'

'Yet Minala is both – what in Hood's name was she thinking?'

Keneb's eyes narrowed on the assassin's, as if he'd suddenly grasped something. Then he shrugged. 'She loves her sister.'

Kalam looked away with a humourless grin. 'Isn't the officer corps a wonderful life.'

Tras wasn't long for that backwater garrison post. He used his messengers to weave a broad net. He was maybe a week away from catching a new commission right at the heart of things.'

'Aren.'

'Aye.'

'You'd get the garrison command, then.'

'And ten more Imperials a month. Enough to hire good tutors for Kesen and Vaneb, instead of that wine-addled old toad with the fiddling hands attached to the garrison staff.'

'Minala doesn't look broken,' Kalam said.

'Oh, she's broken all right. Forced healing was the colonel's mainstay. It's one thing to beat a person senseless, then have to wait a month or more for her to mend before you can do it again. With a squad healer with gambling debts at your side, you can break bones before breakfast and have her ready for more come the next sunrise.'

'With you smartly saluting through it all—'

Keneb winced, glanced away. 'Can't object to what you don't know, Corporal. If I'd had as much as a suspicion ...' He shook his head. 'Closed doors. It was Selv who found out, through a launderer we shared with the

colonel's household. Blood on the sheets and all that. When she told me I went to call him out to the compound.' He grimaced. 'The rebellion interrupted me – I walked into an ambush well under way, and then my only concern was in keeping us all alive.'

'How did the good colonel die?'

'You've just come to a closed door, Corporal.'

Kalam smiled. 'That's all right. Times like these I can see through them well enough.'

'Then I needn't say any more.'

'Looking at Minala, none of this makes sense,' the assassin said.

'There's different kinds of strength, I guess. And defences. She used to be close with Selv, with the children. Now she wraps herself around them like armour, just as cold and just as hard. What she's having trouble with is you, Kalam. You've wrapped yourself in the same way but around her – and the rest of us.'

And she's feeling redundant? Maybe that's how it would look to Keneb. 'Her trouble with me is that she doesn't trust me, Captain.'

'Why in Hood's name not?'

Because I'm holding daggers unseen. And she knows it. Kalam shrugged. 'From what you've told me, I'd expect trust to be something she wouldn't easily grant to anyone, Captain.'

Keneb mused on this, then he sighed and rose. 'Well, enough of that. I've a shroud to stare up at and snores to count.'

Kalam watched the captain move away and settle down beside Selv. The assassin drew a deep, slow breath. *I expect your death was a quick one, Colonel Tras. Be fickle, dear Hood, and spit the bastard back out. I'll kill him again, and Queen turn away,* I'll *not be quick.*

On his belly, Fiddler wormed his way down the rock-tumbled slope, heedlessly scraping his knuckles as he held out his cocked crossbow before him. *That bastard Servant's dissolving in a dozen stomachs by now. Either that or his head's riding a pike minus the ears now dangling from someone's hip.*

All of Icarium's and Mappo's skills had been stretched to the limit with the simple effort of keeping everyone alive. The Whirlwind, for all its violence, was no longer an empty storm scouring a dead land. Servant's trail had led the group into a more focused mayhem.

Another lance flew out from the swirling ochre curtain to his left and landed with a clatter ten paces from where the sapper lay. *Your goddess's wrath leaves you as blind as us, fool!*

They were in hills crawling with Sha'ik's desert warriors. There was both coincidence and something else in this fell convergence. Convergence *indeed. The followers seek the* woman *they're sworn to follow. Too bad that the* other *path happens to be here as well.*

Distant screams rose above the wind's more guttural howl. *ho, the hills are alive with beasts. Foul-tempered ones at that.* Three times in the past hour Icarium had led them around a Soletaken or a D'ivers. There was some kind of mutually agreed avoidance going on – the shapeshifters wanted nothing to do with the Jhag. But *Sha'ik's fanatics. . . ah, now they're fair game. Lucky for us.*

Still, the likelihood that Servant still lived seemed, to Fiddler's mind, very small indeed. He worried for Apsalar as well, and found himself- ironically – praying that a god's skills would prove equal to the task.

Two desert warriors wearing leather armour appeared ahead and below, scampering with panicked haste down towards the base of the gorge.

Fiddler hissed a curse. He was the group's flank on this side – if they got past him ...

The sapper raised his crossbow.

Black cloaks swept over the two figures. They shrieked. The cloaks swarmed, crawled. Spiders, big enough to make out each one even at this distance. Fiddler's skin prickled. *You should have brought brooms, friends.*

He pushed himself up from the crevasse he had wedged himself into, angled right as he scrambled along the slope. And *if I don't get back into Icarium's influence soon, I'll be wishing I had as well.*

The screams of the desert warriors ceased, either with the distance the sapper put between him and them, or blissful release – he hoped the latter. Directly ahead rose the side of the ridge that had – thus far – marked Apsalar and her father's trail.

The wind tugged at him as he clambered his way to the top. Almost immediately he stumbled onto the spine and caught sight of the others, no more than ten paces ahead. The three were crouched over a motionless figure.

Fiddler went cold. *Oh, Hood, make it a stranger ...*

It was. A young man, naked, his skin too pale to make him one of Sha'ik's desert tribesmen. His throat had been cut, the wound gaping down to the vertebra's flattened inner side. There was no blood.

As Fiddler slowly crouched down, Mappo looked over at the sapper. 'A Soletaken, we think,' he said.

'That's Apsalar's work,' Fiddler said. 'See how the head was pushed forward and down, chin tucked to anchor the blade – I've seen it before ...'

'Then she's alive,' Crokus said.

'As I said,' Icarium rumbled. 'As is her father.'

So far so good. Fiddler straightened. 'There's no blood,' he said. 'Any idea how long ago he was killed?'

'No more than an hour,' Mappo said. 'As for the lack of blood ...' He shrugged. 'The Whirlwind is a thirsty goddess.'

The sapper nodded. 'I think I'll stick closer from now on, if you don't mind – I don't think we'll have any more trouble from Sha'ik's warriors – call it a gut feeling.'

Mappo nodded. 'For the moment, we ourselves walk the Path of Hands.'

And why is that, I wonder?

They resumed their journey. Fiddler mused on the half-dozen times he'd seen desert warriors in the past twelve hours. Desperate men and women in truth. Raraku was the centre of the Apocalypse, yet the rebellion was headless and had been for some time. What was going on beyond the Holy Desert's ring of crags?

Anarchy, I'd wager. Slaughter and frenzy. Hearts of ice and the mercy of cold steel. Even if the illusion of Sha'ik is being maintained – her ranking followers now issuing commands – she's not led her army out to make it the rebellion's lodestone. Doesn't sit well proclaiming an uprising, then not showing up to lead it...

Apsalar would have her hands full, should she accept the role. An assassin's skills might keep her alive, but they offered nothing of the intangible magnetism necessary to lead armies. *Commanding* armies was easy enough – the traditional structures ensured that, as the barely competent Fists of the Malazan Empire clearly showed – but *leading* was another thing entirely.

Fiddler could think of only a handful of people possessing that magnetic quality. Dassem Ultor, Prince K'azz D'Avore of the Crimson Guard, Caladan Brood and Dujek Onearm. *Tattersail if she'd had the ambition. Likely Sha'ik herself. And Whiskeyjack.*

As alluring as Apsalar was, the sapper had seen nothing of such force of personality. Competence, without a doubt. Quiet confidence as well. But she clearly preferred observing over participating – *at least until the time came to draw the sticker. Assassins don't bother honing their powers to persuade – why bother? She'll need the right people around her . . .*

Fiddler scowled to himself. He'd already taken it as given that the lass would assume the guise, twined to the central thread of this goddess-woven tapestry. *And here we are, racing through the Whirlwind . . . to arrive in time to witness the prophetic rebirth.*

Eyes narrowed against the blowing grit, the sapper glanced at Crokus. The lad strode half a dozen paces ahead, a step behind Icarium. Even leaning as he did into the biting wind, he betrayed something fraught and fragile in his posture. *She'd said nothing to him before leaving – she'd dismissed him and his concerns as easily as she did the rest of us. Pust offered her father to seal the pact. But sent him out here first. That suggested the old man was a* willing *player in the scheme, a co'conspirator. If I was that lass, I'd have some hard questions for ol' Dadda...*

On all sides, the Whirlwind seemed to howl with laughter.

The bruise was vaguely door-shaped and twice a man's height. Pearl paced before it, muttering to himself, while Lostara Yil watched in weary patience.

Finally he turned, as if suddenly recalling her presence. 'Complications, my dear. I am ... torn.'

The Red Blade eyed the portal. 'Has the assassin left the warren, then? This does not look the same as the other one ...'

The Claw wiped ash from his brow, leaving a dusky streak. 'Ah, no. This represents a ... a detour. I'm the last surviving operative, after all. The Empress so despises idle hands ...' He gave her a wry smile, then shrugged. 'This is not my only concern, alas. We are being tracked.'

She felt a chill at those words. 'We should double back, then. Prepare an ambush—'

Pearl grinned, waved an arm. 'Choose us a likely place, then. Please.'

She glanced around. Flat horizons in all directions. 'What of those raised humps we passed a while back?'

'Never mind those,' the Claw said. 'Safe distance the first time and no closer now.'

'Then that pit...'

'Mechanisms to measure futility. I think not, my dear. For the moment, I fear, we must ignore that which stalks us—'

'What if it's Kalam?'

'It isn't. Thanks to you, we're keeping our eyes on him. Our assassin's mind wanders, and so therefore does his path. An embarrassing lack of discipline for one so weighty. I admit I am disappointed in the man.' He swung to face the portal. 'In any case, we have digressed a rather vast distance here. A small measure of assistance is required – not lengthy, I assure you. The Empress agrees that Kalam's journey suggests ... personal risks to her person, and so must take ultimate precedence. Nonetheless...'

The Claw removed his half-cloak, carefully folding it before setting it down. Across his chest was a belt containing throwing stars. A brace of knives jutted pommel-forward under his left arm. Pearl went through a ritual of checking every weapon.

'Do I wait here?'

'As you like. While I cannot guarantee your safety if you accompany me, I am for a skirmish.'

'The enemy?'

'Followers of the Whirlwind.'

Lostara Yil unsheathed her tulwar.

Pearl grinned, as if well aware of the effect his words would have. 'When we appear, it shall be night. Thick mists, as well. Our foes are Semk and Tithansi, and our allies—'

'Allies? This is a skirmish already underway?'

'Oh, indeed. Wickans and marines of the Seventh.'

Lostara bared her teeth. 'Coltaine.'

His grin broadening, Pearl drew on a pair of thin leather gloves. 'Ideally,' he continued, 'we should remain unseen.'

'Why?'

'If help appears once, the expectation is it will appear again. The risk is dulling Coltaine's edge, and by the Hidden Ones, the Wickan will need that edge in the weeks to come.'

'I am ready.'

'One thing,' the Claw drawled. 'There's a Semk demon. Stay away from it, for while we know virtually nothing of its powers, what we do know suggests an appalling ... temper.'

'I shall be right behind you,' Lostara said.

'Hmm, in that case, once we're through, pull left. I'll go right. Not an auspicious entry my getting trampled, after all.'

The portal flared. In a blur Pearl slid forward and vanished. Lostara jabbed her heels into her mount's flanks. The horse bolted through the portal —

—her hooves thumping hard soil. Fog twisted wildly around her, through a darkness that was alive with screams and detonations. She'd already lost Pearl, but that concern was quickly flung aside as four Tithansi warriors on foot stumbled into view.

A sharper had chewed them up, and none was prepared as Lostara charged them, her tulwar flashing. They scattered, but their wounds made them fatally slow. Two fell to her blade with the first pass. She spun her horse to ready a return charge.

The other two warriors were nowhere to be seen, the mists closing in like slowly tumbling blankets. A flurry of sound to her left brought her wheeling her horse around, in time to see Pearl sprint into view. He spun in midstride and sent a star flashing behind him.

The huge, bestial man that lumbered into sight had his head rocked back as the iron star embedded itself in his forehead. It barely slowed him.

Lostara snarled, quickly dropping the tulwar to swing wildly from the loop around her wrist as she brought her crossbow around.

Her shot went low, the quarrel sinking in just below the Semk's sternum and above the odd thick leather belts protecting his midriff. It proved far more efficacious than Pearl's star. As the man grunted and buckled, she saw with shock that his mouth and nostrils had been sewn shut. He draws *no breath! Here's our demon!*

The Semk straightened, flinging his arms forward. The power that erupted from them was unseen, but both Pearl and Lostara were thrown, tumbling through the air. The horse screamed in mortal agony amidst a rapid crunching and cracking of bones.

The Red Blade landed on her right hip, feeling the bone resound within her like a fractured bell. Then waves of pain closed taloned hands around her leg. Her bladder went, flooding her underclothes in a hot bloom.

Moccasined feet landed beside her. A knife grip was thrust into her hand. 'Take yourself once I'm done! Here it comes!'

Teeth clenched, Lostara Yil twisted around.

The Semk demon was ten paces away, huge and unstoppable. Pearl crouched between them, holding knives that dripped red fire. Lostara knew he considered himself already dead.

The thing that suddenly closed from the demon's left was a nightmare. Black, three-limbed, a jutting shoulder blade like a cowl behind a long-necked head, a grinning jaw crowded with fangs, and a single, flat black eye that glistened wetly.

Even more terrifying was the humanoid figure that sat behind that shoulder blade, its face a mocking mimicry of the beast it rode, the lips peeled back to reveal daggerlike fangs as long as a toddler's fingers, its lone eye flashing.

The apparition struck the Semk demon like a runaway armoured wagon. The single forelimb snapped forward to plunge deep into the demon's belly, then pulled back in an explosion of spurting fluids. Clenched in that forelimb's grip was something that radiated fury in palpable waves. The air went icy.

Pearl backed away until his heels struck Lostara, then he reached down one hand, eyes still on the scene, and gripped her weapon harness.

The Semk's body seemed to fold in on itself as it staggered back. The apparition reared, still clutching the fleshy, dripping object.

Its rider made a grab for it, but the creature hissed, twisting to keep it out of his reach. Instead it flung the object away into the mists.

The Semk stumbled after it.

The apparition's long head swung to face Lostara and Pearl with that ghastly grin.

'Thank you,' Pearl whispered.

A portal blossomed around them.

Lostara blinked up at a dull, ash-laden sky. There was no sound but their breathing. *Safe. A* moment later unconsciousness slipped over her like a shroud.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

> An exquisite match of dog to master, the Wickan cattle-dog is a vicious, unpredictable breed, compact yet powerful, though by far its most notable characteristic is its stubborn will.
>
> *Lives of the Conquered*
> Ilem Trauth

As Duiker strode between the large, spacious tents, a chorus of shouts erupted ahead. A moment later one of the Wickan dogs appeared, head low, a surging rush of muscle, heading straight for the historian.

Duiker fumbled for his sword, already knowing it was far too late. At the last instant the huge animal dodged lithely around him, and the historian saw that it held in its mouth a lapdog, its eyes dark pools of terror.

The cattle-dog ran on, slipping between two tents and disappearing from sight.

Ahead of the historian, a number of figures appeared, armed with large rocks and – bizarrely – Kanese parasols. One and all, they were dressed as if about to attend a royal function, although in their expressions Duiker saw raw fury.

'You there!' one yelled imperiously. 'Old man! Did you see a mad hound just now?'

'I saw a running cattle-dog, aye,' the historian quietly replied.

'With a rare Hengese roach dog in its mouth?'

A *dog that eats cockroaches?* 'Rare? I assumed it was raw.'

The nobles grew quiet as gazes focused on Duiker.

'A foolish time for humour, old man,' the spokesman growled. He was younger than the others, his honey-coloured skin and large eyes denoting his Quon Talian lineage. He was lean, with the physical assurance of a duellist – the identification confirmed by the basket-hiked rapier at his belt. Moreover, there was something in the man's eyes that suggested to Duiker that here was someone who enjoyed killing.

The man approached, his walk becoming a swagger. 'An apology, peasant – though I'll grant it won't save you from a beating, at least you'll stay breathing ...'

A horseman approached from behind at a canter.

Duiker saw the duellist's eyes dart over the historian's shoulder.

Corporal List reined in, ignoring the nobleman. 'My apologies, sir,' he said. 'I was delayed at the smithy. Where is your horse?'

'With the main herd,' Duiker replied. 'A day off for the poor beast – long overdue.'

For a young man of low rank, List managed an impressive expression of cold regard as he finally looked down at the nobleman. 'If we arrive late, sir,' he said to Duiker, 'Coltaine will demand an explanation.'

The historian addressed the nobleman. 'Are we done here?'

The man gave a curt nod. 'For now,' he said.

Escorted by the corporal, Duiker resumed his journey through the nobles' camp. When they had gone a dozen paces, List leaned over his saddle. 'Alar looked ready to call you out, Historian.'

'He's known, then? Alar.'

'Pullyk Alar—'

'How unfortunate for him.'

List grinned.

They came to a central clearing in the encampment and discovered a whipping underway. The short, wide man with the leather cat-tail in one heat-bloated hand was familiar. The victim was a servant. Three other servants stood off to one side, their eyes averted. A few other noble-born stood nearby, gathered around a weeping woman and voicing murmurs of consolation.

Lenestro's gold-brocaded cloak had lost some of its brilliant sheen, and in his red-faced frenzy as he swung the cat-tail he looked like a frothing ape performing the traditional King's Mirror farce at a village fair.

'I see the nobles are pleased by the return of their servant-folk,' List said dryly.

'I suspect this has more to do with a snatched lapdog,' the historian muttered. 'In any case, this stops now.'

The corporal glanced over. 'He'll simply resume it later, sir.'

Duiker said nothing.

'Who would steal a lapdog?' List wondered, staying alongside the historian as he approached Lenestro.

'Who wouldn't? We've water but we're still hungry. In any case, one of the Wickan cattle-dogs thought it up before the rest of us – to our collective embarrassment.'

'I blame preoccupation, sir.'

Lenestro noted their approach and paused his whipping, his breath loud as a bellows.

Ignoring the nobleman, Duiker went to the servant. The man was old, down on his elbows and knees, hands held protectively behind his head. Red welts rode his knuckles, his neck and down the length of his bony back. Beneath the ruin were the tracks of older scars. A jewel-studded leash with a broken collar lay in the dust beside him.

'Not your business, Historian,' Lenestro snapped.

'These servants stood a Tithansi charge at Sekala,' Duiker said. 'That defence helped to keep your head on your shoulders, Lenestro.'

'Coltaine stole property!' the nobleman squealed. 'The Council so judged him, the fine has been issued!'

'Issued,' List said, 'and duly pissed on.'

Lenestro wheeled on the corporal, raised his whip.

'A warning,' Duiker said, straightening. 'Striking a soldier of the Seventh – or, for that matter, his horse – will see you hung.'

Lenestro visibly struggled with his temper, his arm still raised, the whip quivering.

Others were gathering, their sympathy clearly united with Lenestro. Even so, the historian did not anticipate violence. The nobles might well possess unrealistic notions, but they were anything but suicidal.

Duiker spoke, 'Corporal, we'll take this man to the Seventh's healers.'

'Yes, sir,' List replied, briskly dismounting.

The servant had passed out. Together they carried him to the horse and laid him belly-down across the saddle.

'He shall be returned to me once healed,' Lenestro said.

'So you can do it all over again? Wrong, he'll not be returned to you.' *And if you and your comrades are outraged, wait till an hour from now.*

'All such acts contrary to Malazan law are being noted,' the nobleman said shrilly. 'There shall be recompense, with interest.'

Duiker had heard enough. He suddenly closed the distance to grasp Lenestro's cloak collar with both hands, and gave the man a teeth-rattling shake. The whip fell to the ground. The nobleman's eyes were wide with terror – reminding the historian of the lapdog's as it rode the hound's mouth.

'You probably think,' Duiker whispered, 'that I'm about to tell you about the situation we're all in. But it's already quite evident that there'd be little

point. You are a small-brained thug, Lenestro. Push me again, and I'll have you eating pigshit and liking it.' He shook the pathetic creature again, then dropped him.

Lenestro collapsed.

Duiker frowned down at the man.

'He's fainted, sir,' List said.

'So he has.' *Old man scared you, did he?*

'Was that really necessary?' a voice asked plaintively. Nethpara emerged from the crowd. 'As if our ongoing petition is not crowded enough, now we have personal bullying to add to our grievances. Shame on you, Historian —'

'Excuse me, sir,' List said, 'but you might wish to know – before you resume berating the historian – that scholarship came late to this man. You will find his name among the Noted on the First Army's Column at Unta, and had you not just come late to this scene, you would have witnessed an old soldier's temper. Indeed, it was admirable restraint that the historian elected to use both hands to grip Lenestro's cloak, lest he use one to unsheathe that well-worn sword at his hip and drive it through the toad's heart.'

Nethpara blinked sweat from his eyes.

Duiker slowly swung to face List.

The corporal noted the dismay in the historian's face and answered it with a wink. 'We'd best move on, sir,' he said.

They left behind a gathering in the clearing that broke its silence only after they'd entered the opposite aisle.

List walked alongside the historian, leading his horse by the reins. 'It still astonishes me that they persist in the notion that we will survive this journey.'

Duiker glanced over in surprise. 'Are you lacking such faith, then, Corporal?'

'We'll never reach Aren, Historian. Yet the fools compile their petitions, their grievances – against the very people keeping them alive.'

'There's great need to maintain the illusion of order, List. In us all.'

The young man's expression turned wry. 'I missed your moment of sympathy back there, sir.'

'Obviously.'

They left the nobles' encampment and entered the mayhem of the wagons bearing wounded. Voices moaned a constant chorus of pain. A chill crept over Duiker. Even wheeled hospitals carried with them that pervasive atmosphere of fear, the sounds of defiance and the silence of surrender. Mortality's many comforting layers had been stripped away, revealing wracked bones, a sudden comprehension of death that throbbed like an exposed nerve.

Awareness and revelations thickened the prairie air in a manner priests could only dream of for their temples. To *fear the gods is to fear death. In places where men and women are dying, the gods no longer stand in the spaces in between. The soothing intercession is gone. They've stepped back, back through the gates, and watch from the other side. Watch and wait.*

'We should've gone around,' List muttered.

'Even without that man in need on your horse,' Duiker said, 'I would have insisted we pass through this place, Corporal.'

'I've learned this lesson already,' List replied, a tautness in his tone.

'From your earlier words, I would suggest that the lesson you have learned is different from mine, lad.'

'This place encourages you, Historian?'

'Strengthens, Corporal, though in a cold way, I admit. Never mind the games of Ascendants. This is what we are. The endless struggle laid bare.

Gone is the idyllic, the deceit of self-import as well as the false humility of insignificance. Even as we battle wholly personal battles, we are unified. This is the place of level earth, Corporal. That is its lesson, and I wonder if it is an accident that that deluded mob in gold threads must walk in the wake of these wagons.'

'Either way, few revelations have bled back to stain noble sentiments.'

'No? I smelled desperation back there, Corporal.'

List spied a healer and they delivered the servant into the woman's blood-smeared hands.

The sun was low on the horizon directly ahead by the time they reached the Seventh's main camp. The faint smoke from the dung fires hung like gilded gauze over the ordered rows of tents. Off to one side two squads of infantry had set to in a contest of belt-grip, using a leather-strapped skullcap for a ball. A ring of cheering, jeering onlookers had gathered. Laughter rang in the air.

Duiker remembered the words of an old marine from his soldiering days. *Some times you just have to grin and spit in Hood's face.* The contesting squads were doing just that, running themselves ragged to sneer at their own exhaustion besides, and well aware that Tithansi eyes watched from a distance.

They were a day away from the River P'atha, and the impending battle was a promise that thickened the dusk.

Two of the Seventh's marines flanked Coltaine's command tent, and the historian recognized one of them.

She nodded. 'Historian.'

There was a look in her pale eyes that seemed to lay an invisible hand against his chest, and Duiker was stilled to silence, though he managed a smile.

As they passed between the drawn flaps, List murmured, 'Well now, Historian.'

'Enough of that, Corporal.' But he did not glance over to nail the young man's grin, as he was tempted to do. A *man gets to an age where he's wise not to banter on desire with a comrade half his age. Too pathetic by far, that illusion of competition. Besides, that look of hers was likely more pitying than anything else, no matter what my heart whispered. Put an end to your foolish thoughts, old man.*

Coltaine stood near the centre pole, his expression dark. Duiker and List's arrival had interrupted a conversation. Bult and Captain Lull sat on saddle-chairs, looking glum. Sormo stood wrapped in an antelope hide, his back to the tent's far wall, his eyes hooded in shadow. The air was sweltering and tense.

Bult cleared his throat. 'Sormo was explaining about the Semk godling,' he said. 'The spirits say something damaged it. Badly. The night of the raid – a demon walked the land. Lightly, I gather, leaving a spoor not easily sniffed out. In any case, it appeared, mauled the Semk, then left. It seems, Historian, that the Claw had company.'

'An Imperial demon?'

Bult shrugged and swung his flat gaze to Sormo.

The warlock, looking like a black vulture perched on a fence pole, stirred slightly. 'There is precedent,' he admitted. 'Yet Nil believes otherwise.'

'Why?' Duiker asked.

There was a long pause before Sormo answered. 'When Nil fled into himself that night . . . no, that is, he *believed* that it was his own mind that sheltered him from the Semk's sorcerous attack . ..' It was clear that the warlock was in difficulty with his words. 'The Tano Spiritwalkers of this land are said to be able to quest through a hidden world – not a true warren, but a realm where souls are freed of flesh and bone. It seems that Nil stumbled into such a place, and there he came face to face with... someone else. At first he thought it but an aspect of himself, a monstrous reflection —'

'Monstrous?' Duiker asked.

'A boy of Nil's own age, yet with a demonic face. Nil believes it was bonded with the apparition that attacked the Semk. Imperial demons rarely possess human familiars.'

'Then who sent it?'

'Perhaps no-one.'

No wonder Coltaine's had his black feathers ruffled.

After a few minutes Bult sighed loudly, stretching out his gnarled, bandy legs. 'Kamist Reloe has prepared a welcome for us the other side of the River P'atha. We cannot afford to go around him. Therefore we shall go through him.'

'You ride with the marines,' Coltaine told Duiker.

The historian glanced at Captain Lull.

The red-bearded man grinned. 'Seems you've earned a place with the best, old man.'

'Hood's breath! I'll not last five minutes in a line of battle. My heart nearly gave out after a skirmish lasting all of three breaths the other night—'

'We won't be front line,' Lull said. 'There ain't enough of us left for that. If all goes as planned we won't even get our swords nicked.'

'Oh, very well.' Duiker turned to Coltaine. 'Returning the servants to the nobles was a mistake,' he said. 'It seems the noble-born have concluded that you'll not take them away again if they're not fit to stand.'

Bult said, 'They showed spine, those servants, at Sekala Crossing. Just holding shields, mind, but hold is what they did.'

'Uncle, do you still have that scroll demanding compensation?' Coltaine asked.

'Aye.'

'And that compensation was calculated based on the worth of each servant, in coin?'

Bult nodded.

'Collect the servants and pay for them in full, in gold jakatas.'

'Aye, though all that gold will burden the nobles sorely.'

'Better them than us.'

Lull cleared his throat. 'That coin's the soldiers' pay, ain't it?'

'The Empire honours its debts,' Coltaine growled.

It was a statement that promised to grow in resonance in the time to come, and the momentary silence in the tent told Duiker that he was not alone in that recognition.

Capemoths swarmed across the face of the moon. Duiker sat beside the flaked embers of a cooking fire. A nervous energy had driven the historian from his bedroll. On all sides the camp slept, a city exhausted. Even the animals had fallen silent.

Rhizan swept through the warm air above the hearth, plucking hovering insects on the wing. The soft crunch of exoskeletons was a constant crackle.

A dark shape appeared at Duiker's side, lowered itself into a squat, held silent.

After a while, Duiker said, 'A Fist needs his rest.'

Coltaine grunted. 'And a historian?'

'Never rests.'

'We are denied in our needs,' the Wickan said.

'It was ever thus.'

'Historian, you joke like a Wickan.'

'I've made a study of Bult's lack of humour.'

'That much is patently clear.'

There was silence between them for a time. Duiker could make no claim to know the man at his side. If the Fist was plagued by doubts he did not show it, nor, of course, would he. A commander could not reveal his flaws. With Coltaine, however, it was more than his rank dictating his recalcitrance. Even Bult had occasion to mutter that his nephew was a man who isolated himself to levels far beyond the natural Wickan stoicism.

Coltaine never made speeches to his troops, and while he was often seen by his soldiers, he did not make a point of it as many commanders did. Yet those soldiers belonged to him now, as if the Fist could fill every silent space with a physical assurance as solid as a gripping of forearms.

What happens the day that faith is shattered? What if we are but hours from that day?

'The enemy hunts our scouts,' Coltaine said. 'We cannot see what has been prepared for us in the valley ahead.'

'Sormo's allies?'

'The spirits are preoccupied.'

Ah, the Semk godling.

'Can'eld, Debrahl, Tithan, Semk, Tepasi, Halafan, Ubari, Hissari, Sialk and Guran.'

Four *tribes now. Six city legions. Am I hearing doubt?*

The Fist spat into the embers. 'The army that awaits us is one of two holding the south.'

How in Hood's name does he know this? 'Has Sha'ik marched out of Raraku, then?'

'She has not. A mistake.'

'What holds her back? Has the rebellion been crushed in the north?'

'Crushed? No, it commands all. As for Sha'ik ...' Coltaine paused to adjust his crow-feather cape. 'Perhaps her visions have taken her into the future. Perhaps she knows the Whirlwind shall fail, that even now the Adjunct to

the Empress assembles her legions – Unta's harbour is solid with transports. The Whirlwind's successes will prove but momentary, a first blood-rush that succeeded only because of Imperial weakness. Sha'ik knows... the dragon has been stirred awake, and moves ponderously still, yet when the full fury comes, it shall scour this land from shore to shore.'

'This other army, here in the south ... how far away?'

Coltaine straightened. 'I intend to arrive at Vathar two days before it.'

Word must have reached him that Ubaryd has fallen, along with Devral and Asmar. Vathar – the third and last river. If we make Vathar, it's a straight run south to Aren – through the most forbidding wasteland on this Hood-Cursed continent. 'Fist, the River Vathar is still months away. What of tomorrow?'

Coltaine pulled his gaze from the embers and blinked at the historian. 'Tomorrow we crush Kamist Reloe's army, of course. One must think far ahead to succeed, Historian. You should understand that.'

The Fist strolled away.

Duiker stared at the dying fire, a sour taste in his mouth. That *taste is fear, old man. You've not got Coltaine's impenetrable armour. You cannot see past a few hours from now, and you await the dawn in the belief that it shall be your last, and therefore you must witness it. Coltaine expects the impossible, he expects us to share in his implacable confidence. To share in his madness.*

A rhizan landed on his boot, delicate wings folding as it settled. A young capemoth was in the winged lizard's mouth, its struggles continuing even as the rhizan methodically devoured it.

Duiker waited until the creature had finished its meal before a twitch of his foot sent it winging away. The historian straightened. The sounds of activity had risen in the Wickan encampments. He made his way towards the nearest one.

The horsewarriors of the Foolish Dog Clan had gathered to ready their equipment beneath the glare of torch poles. Duiker strode closer. Ornate

boiled leather armour had appeared, dyed in deep and muddy shades of red and green. The thick, padded gear was in a style the historian had never seen before. Wickan runes had been burned into it. The armour looked ancient, yet never used.

Duiker approached the nearest warrior, a peach-faced youth busy rubbing grease into a horse's brow-guard. 'Heavy armour for a Wickan,' the historian said. 'And for a Wickan horse as well.'

The young man nodded soberly, said nothing.

'You're turning yourselves into heavy cavalry.'

The lad shrugged.

An older warrior nearby spoke up. 'The warleader devised these during the rebellion . . . then agreed peace with the Emperor before they could be used.'

'And you have been carrying them around with you all this time?'

'Aye.'

'Why didn't you use this armour at Sekala Crossing?'

'Didn't need to.'

'And now?'

Grinning, the veteran raised an iron helm with new bridge and cheek-guards attached. 'Reloe's horde hasn't faced heavy cavalry yet, has it?'

Thick *armour doesn't make heavy cavalry. Have you fools ever trained for this? Can you gallop in an even line? Can you wheel? How soon before your horses are winded beneath all that extra weight?* 'You'll look intimidating enough,' the historian said.

The Wickan caught the scepticism and his grin broadened.

The youth set down the brow-guard and began strapping on a sword belt. He slid the blade from the scabbard, revealing four feet of blackened iron,

its tip rounded and blunt. The weapon looked heavy, oversized in the lad's hands.

Hood's *breath, one swing'll yank him from his saddle.*

The veteran grunted. 'Limber up there, Temul,' he said in Malazan.

Temul immediately launched into a complex choreography, the blade blurring in his hand.

'Do you intend to dismount once you reach the enemy?'

'Sleep would have done much for your mind's cast, old man.'

Point taken, bastard.

Duiker wandered away. He'd always hated the hours before a battle. None of the rituals of preparation had ever worked for him. A check of weapons and gear rarely took an experienced soldier more than twenty heartbeats. The historian had never been able to repeat that check mindlessly, again and again, as did so many soldiers. Keeping the hands busy while the mind slowly slid into a sharp-edged world of saturated colours, painful clarity and a kind of lustful hunger that seized body and soul.

Some warriors ready themselves to live, some ready themselves to die, and in these hours before the fate unfolds, it's damned hard to tell one from the other. The lad Temul's dance a moment ago might be his last. That damned sword may never again leap from its sheath and sing on the end of his hand.

The sky was lightening in the east, the cool wind beginning to warm. The vast dome overhead was cloudless. A formation of birds flew high to the north, the pattern of specks almost motionless.

The Wickan camp behind him, Duiker entered the regimental rows of tents that marked the Seventh. The various elements maintained their cohesion in the encampment's layout, and each was clearly identifiable to the historian. The medium infantry, who formed the bulk of the army, were arranged by company, each company consisting of cohorts that were in turn made up of squads. They would go into battle with full-body shields of

bronze, pikes and short swords. They wore bronze scale hauberks, greaves and gauntlets, and bronze helmets reinforced with iron bars wrapped in a cage around the skullcap. Chain camails protected their necks and shoulders. The other footmen consisted of marines and sappers, the former a combination of heavy infantry and shock troops – the old Emperor's invention and still unique to the Empire. They were armed with crossbows and short swords as well as long swords. They wore blackened chain beneath grey leathers. Every third soldier carried a large, round shield of thick, soft wood that would be soaked for an hour before battle. These shields were used to catch and hold enemy weapons ranging from swords to flails. They would be discarded after the first few minutes of a fight, usually studded with an appalling array of edged and spiked iron. This peculiar tactic of the Seventh had proved effective against the Semk and their undisciplined, two-handed fighting methods. The marines called it puffing *teeth.*

The sappers' encampment was set somewhat apart from the others – as far away as possible when they carried Moranth munitions. Though he looked, Duiker could not see its location, but he knew well what he'd find. *Look for the most disordered collection of tents and foul-smelling vapours aswarm with mosquitoes and gnats and you'll have found Malazan Engineers. And in that quarter you'll find soldiers shaking like leaves, with splash-bum pockmarks, singed hair and a dark, manic gleam in their eyes.*

Corporal List stood with Captain Lull at one end of the Marine encampment, close to the attachment of loyal Hissari Guards – whose soldiers were readying their tulwars and round shields in grim silence. Coltaine held them in absolute trust, and the Seven Cities natives had proved themselves again and again with fanatic ferocity – as if they had assumed a burden of shame and guilt and could only relieve it by slaughtering every one of their traitorous kin.

Captain Lull smiled as the historian joined them. 'Got a cloth for your face? We'll be eating dust today, old man, in plenty.'

'We will be the back end of the wedge, sir,' List said, looking none too pleased.

'I'd rather swallow dust than a yard of cold iron,' Duiker said. 'Do we know what we're facing yet, Lull?'

'That's "Captain" to you.'

'As soon as you stop calling me "old man", I'll start calling you by your rank.'

'I was jesting, Duiker,' Lull said. 'Call me what you like, and that includes pig-headed bastard if it pleases you.'

'It just might.'

Lull's face twisted sourly. 'Didn't get any sleep, did you?' He swung to List. 'If the old codger starts nodding off, you've my permission to give him a clout on that bashed-up helmet of his, Corporal.'

'If I can stay awake myself, sir. This good cheer is wearing me out.'

Lull grimaced at Duiker. 'The lad's showing spark these days.'

'Isn't he just.'

The sun was burning clear of the horizon. Pale-winged birds flitted over the humped hills to the north. Duiker glanced down at his boots. The morning dew had seeped through the worn leather. Strands of snagged spiderwebs made a stretched, glittering pattern over the toes. He found it unaccountably beautiful. *Gossamer webs . . . intricate traps. Yet it was my thoughtless passage that left the night's work undone. Will the spiders go hungry this day because of it?*

'Shouldn't dwell on what's to come,' Lull said.

Duiker smiled, looked up at the sky. 'What's the order?'

'The Seventh's marines are the spear's point. Crow riders to either side are the flanking barbs. Foolish Dog – now a Toggthundering heavy cavalry – are the weight behind the marines. Then come the wounded, protected on all sides by the Seventh's infantry. Taking up the tail are the Hissari Loyals and the Seventh's cavalry.'

Duiker was slow to react, then he blinked and faced the captain.

Lull nodded. 'The refugees and herds are being held back, this side of the valley but slightly south, on a low shelf of land the maps call the Shallows, with a ridge of hills south of that. The Weasel Clan guards them. It's the safest thing to do – that clan's turned dark and nasty since Sekala. Their horse-warriors have all filed their teeth, if you can believe that.'

'We go to this battle unencumbered,' the historian said.

'Excepting the wounded, aye.'

Captains Sulmar and Chenned emerged from the infantry encampment. Sulmar's posture and expression radiated outrage, Chenned's was mocking if slightly bemused.

'Blood and guts!' Sulmar hissed, his greased moustache bristling. 'Those damned sappers and their Hood-spawned captain have done it this time!'

Chenned met Duiker's gaze and shook his head. 'Coltaine went white at the news.'

'What news?'

'The sappers lit out last night!' Sulmar snarled. 'Hood rot the cowards one and all! Poliel bless them with pestilence, pox their illegitimate brood with her pus-soaked kiss! Togg trample that captain's ba—'

Chenned was laughing in disbelief. 'Captain Sulmar! What would your friends in the Council say to such foul-mouthed cursing?'

'Burn take you, too, Chenned! I'm a soldier first, damn you. A trickle to a flood, that's what we're facing—'

'There won't be any desertions,' Lull said, his battered fingers slowly raking through his beard. 'The sappers ain't run away. They're up to something, I'd hazard. It's not easy reining in that unwashed, motley company when you can't even track down its captain – but I don't imagine Coltaine will make the same mistake again.'

'He'll not have the chance,' Sulmar muttered. 'The first worms will crawl into our ears before the day's done. It's the oblivious feast for us all, mark my words.'

Lull raised his brows. 'If that's as encouraging as you can manage, Sulmar, I pity your soldiers.'

'Pity's for the victors, Lull.'

A lone horn wailed its mournful note.

'Waiting's over,' Chenned said with obvious relief. 'Save me a patch of grass when you go down, gentlemen.'

Duiker watched the two Seventh captains depart. He'd not heard that particular send-off in a long time.

'Chenned's father was in Dassem's First Sword,' Lull said.

'Or so goes the rumour – even when names are swept from official histories, the past shows its face, eh, old man?'

Duiker was in no mood to rise to either jibe. 'Think I'll check my gear,' he said, turning away.

It was noon before the final positioning was completed. There had been a near riot when the refugees finally understood that the main army was to make the crossing without them. Coltaine's selection of the Weasel Clan as their escort – the horsewarriors presented a truly terrifying visage with their threaded skin, black tattooing and filed teeth – proved his cunning yet again, although the Weasel riders almost took it too far with their bloodthirsty taunts flung at the very people they were sworn to protect. Desultory calm was established, despite the frenzied, fear-stricken efforts of the noble-born's Council and their seemingly inexhaustible capacity to deliver protests and writs.

With the main force finally assembled, Coltaine issued the command to move forward.

The day was blisteringly hot, the parched ground rising in clouds of dust as soon as the brittle grass was worn away by hooves and tramping boots. Lull's prediction of eating dust proved depressingly accurate, as Duiker

once more raised his tin belt-flask to his lips, letting water seep into his mouth and down the dry gully of his throat.

Marching on his left was Corporal List, his face caked white, helmet sliding down over his sweat-sheened forehead. On the historian's right strode the veteran marine – he did not know her name, nor would he ask. Duiker's fear of what was to come had spread through him like an infection. His thoughts felt fevered, spinning around an irrational terror of ... *of knowledge. Of the details that* remind *one of humanity. Names to faces are like twinned serpents threatening the most painful bite of all. I'll never return to the List of the Fallen, because I see now that the unnamed soldier is a gift. The named soldier – dead, melted wax – demands a response among the living* ... a *response* no-one *can make. Names are no comfort, they're a call to answer the unanswerable. Why did she die, not him? Why do the survivors remain anonymous –as if cursed – while the dead are revered? Why do we cling to what we lose while we ignore what we still hold?*

Name none of the fallen, for they stood in our place, and stand there still in each moment of our lives. Let my death hold no glory, and let me die forgotten and unknown. Let it not be said that I *was one among the dead to accuse the living.*

The River P'atha bisected a dry lake bed two thousand paces east to west and over four thousand north to south. As the vanguard reached the eastern ridge and proceeded down into the basin, Duiker was presented with a panoramic view of what would become the field of battle.

Kamist Reloe and his army awaited them, the glitter of iron vast and bright in the morning glare, city standards and tribal pennons hanging dull and listless above the sea of peaked helms. The arrayed soldiers rustled and rippled as if tugged by unseen currents. Their numbers were staggering.

The river was a thin, narrow strip six hundred paces ahead, studded with boulders and lined in thorny brush on both sides. A trader track marked the traditional place of crossing, then wound westward to what had once been a gentle slope to the opposite ridge – but Reloe's sappers had been busy: a ramp of sandy earth had been constructed, the natural slope to either side

carved away to create a steep, high cliff. To the south of the lake bed was a knotted jumble of arroyos, basoliths, screes and jagged outcroppings; to the north rose a serrated ridge of hills bone white under the sun. Kamist Reloe had made sure there was only one point of exit westward, and at the summit waited his elite forces.

'Hood's breath!' muttered Corporal List. 'The bastard's rebuilt Gelor Ridge, and look to the south, sir, that column of smoke – that was the garrison at Melm.'

Squinting that way, Duiker saw another feature closer at hand. Set atop a pinnacle looming over the southeast end of the lake bed was a fortress. 'Who did that belong to?' he wondered aloud.

'A monastery,' List said. 'According to the only map that showed it.'

'Which Ascendant?'

List shrugged. 'Probably one of the Seven Holies.'

'If there's anyone still in there, they'll get quite a view of what's to come.'

Kamist Reloe had positioned forces down and to either side of his elite companies, blocking the north and south ends of the basin. Standards of the Sialk, Halafan, Debrahl and Tithansi contingents rose from the southern element; Ubari the northern. Each of the three forces outnumbered Coltaine's by a large margin. A roar began building from the army of the Apocalypse, along with a rhythmic clash of weapons on shields.

The marines marched towards the crossing in silence. Voices and clangour rolled over them like a wave. The Seventh did not falter.

Gods below, what will come of this?

The River P'atha was an ankle-deep trickle of warm water, less than a dozen paces across. Algae covered the pebbles and stones of the bottom. The larger boulders were splashed white with guano. Insects buzzed and danced in the air. The river's cool breath vanished as soon as Duiker stepped onto the opposite bank, the basin's baked heat sweeping over him like a cloak.

Sweat soaked the quilted undergarment beneath his chain hauberk; it ran down in dirty runnels beneath gauntlets and into the historian's palms. He tightened his grip on the shield strap, his other hand resting on the pommel of his short sword. His mouth was suddenly bone dry, though he resisted the urge to drink from his flask. The air stank of the soldiers he followed, a miasma of sweat and fear. There was a sense of something else, as well, a strange melancholy that seemed to accompany the relentless forward motion of the company.

Duiker had known that sense before, decades ago. It was not defeat, nor desperation. The sadness arose from whatever lay beyond such visceral reactions, and it felt measured and all too aware.

We go to partake of death. And it is in these moments, before the blades are unsheathed, before blood wets the ground and screams fill the air, that the futility descends upon us all. Without *our armour, we would all weep, I think. How else to answer the impending promise of incalculable loss?*

'Our swords will be well notched this day,' List said beside him, his voice dry and breaking. 'In your experience, sir, what's worse – dust or mud?'

Duiker grunted. 'Dust chokes. Dust blinds. But mud slips the world from under your feet.' And *we'll have mud soon enough, when enough blood and bile and piss have soaked the ground. An equal measure of both curses, lad.* 'Your first battle, then?'

List grimaced. 'Attached to you, sir, I've not been in the thick of things yet.'

'You sound resentful.'

The corporal said nothing, but Duiker understood well enough. The soldier's companions had all gone through their first blooding, and that was a threshold both feared and anticipated. Imagination whispered untruths that only experience could shatter.

Nevertheless, the historian would have preferred a more remote vantage point. Marching with the ranks, he could see nothing beyond the press of

humanity around him. *Why did Coltaine put me here? He's taken from me my eyes, damn him.*

They were a hundred paces from the ramp. Horsewarriors galloped across the front of the flanking enemy forces, ensuring that all held position. The drumming shields and screams of rage promised blood and would not be held in check for much longer. *Then we will be assailed from three sides, and an effort will be made to cut us away from the Seventh's infantry while they struggle to defend the wounded. They'll behead the serpent, if they can.*

The Crow horsewarriors were readying bows and lances to either side, heads turned and fixed on the enemy positions. A horn announced the command to ready shields, the front line locking while the centre and rear lofted theirs overhead. Archers were visible, scrambling into position at the top of the ramp.

There was no wind, the motionless air heavy.

It may have been disbelief that held the flanking forces back. Coltaine had displayed no reaction to the enemy's positions and strength; indeed the Seventh simply marched on and, reaching the ramp, began the ascent without pause.

The slope was soft, boulders and sand, deliberately treacherous underfoot. Soldiers stumbled.

Suddenly arrows filled the sky, sweeping down like rain. Horrendous clattering racketed over Duiker's head as shafts snapped, skidded across the upraised shields, some slipping through to strike armour and helms, some piercing flesh. Voices grunted beneath the turtle's back. Cobbles pitched underfoot. Yet the carapaced wedge climbed on without pause.

The historian's elbows buckled as an arrow struck his shield a solid blow. Three more rapped down in quick succession, all glancing impacts that then skittered away across other shields.

The air beneath the shields grew sour and turgid – sweat, urine and a growing anger. An attack that could not be answered was a soldier's nightmare. The determination to reach the crest, where waited howling

Semk and Guran heavy infantry, burned like a fever. Duiker knew that the marines were being driven towards a threshold. The first contact would be explosive.

The ramp was banked on either side closer to the ridge, steep and high, its top flattened and broad across. Warriors from a tribe Duiker could not identify – *Can'eld?* – began assembling on the banks and readying short horn bows. *They'll fire down on us from both sides once we lock with the Semk and Guran.* An *enfilade.*

Bult rode with the flanking Crow horsewarriors, and the historian clearly heard the veteran's bellowing command. In a flash of dust and iron, riders wheeled and swept towards the banks. Arrows flew. The Can'eld – caught by the swiftness of the Wickan response – scattered. Bodies fell, tumbling down to the ramp. The Crow warriors rode along the ditch, raking the high bank with murderous missile fire. Within moments the flat top was clear of standing tribesmen.

A second shout reined in the horsewarriors, their lead riders less than a dozen paces from the bristling line of Semk and Guran. The sudden halt drew the wild Semk forward. Throwing axes flew end over end through the intervening space. Arrows darted in return fire.

The forward tip of the wedge surged as the marines saw the disorder in the enemy front line. Crow riders spun their horses, rising high in their saddles as they careered to avoid being pinned between the closing footsoldiers and inadvertently breaking up the marines' momentum. They pulled clear with moments to spare.

The wedge struck.

Through the shield Duiker felt the impact's thunder, a resounding roll that jarred his bones. He could see little from his position apart from a small patch of blue sky directly above the heads of the soldiers, and into that air spun a snapped pike-shaft and a helm that might have still held in its strap a bearded jaw, before dust rose up in an impenetrable shroud.

'Sir!' A hand tugged at his shield arm. 'You're to turn now!'

Turn? Duiker glared at List.

The corporal pulled him round. 'So you can see, sir—'

They were standing in the next to last line of the wedge. A space of ten paces yawned between the marines and the mounted, arcanely armoured Foolish Dog horsewarriors, who stood motionless, heavy swords bared and resting crossways across their saddles. Beyond them, the basin stretched – the historian's position high on the earthen ramp afforded him a view of the rest of the battle.

To the south were closed ranks of Tithansi archers supported by Debrahl cavalry. Legions of Halafan infantry marched east of them – to their right – and in their midst a company of Sialk heavy infantry. Further east were more cavalry and archers. *One jaw, and to the north, the other. Now inexorably snapping shut.*

He looked to the north. The Ubari legions – at least three – along with Sialk and Tepasi cavalry, were less than fifty paces from contacting the Seventh's infantry. Among the standards jutting from the Ubari, Duiker saw a flash of grey and black colours. Marine-trained *locals, now there's irony for you.*

East of the river a huge battle was underway, if the vast pall of drifting dust was any indication. The Weasel Clan had found their fight after all. The historian wondered which of Kamist Reloe's forces had managed to circle round. A *strike for the herds, and the gift of slaughter among the refugees. Hold fast, Weasels, you'll get no relief from the rest of us.*

Jostling from the soldiers around him brought Duiker's attention back to his immediate surroundings. The clash of weapons and screams from the ridge was growing as the wedge slowly flattened out against an anvil of stiff, disciplined resistance. The first reeling knock-back rippled through the press.

Togg's three masks of war. Before the day's done we'll each of us wear them all. Terror, rage and pain. We won't take the ridge—

A deeper roar sounded in the basin behind them. The historian twisted around. The jaws had closed. The Seventh's hollow box around the wagons of the wounded was crumpling, writhing, like a worm beset by ants. Duiker stared, a wave of dread rising within him, expecting to see that box disintegrate, torn apart by the ferocity assailing it.

The Seventh resisted, impossible though it seemed to the historian's mind. On all sides the enemy reared back as if those jaws had closed on poisonous thorns and the instinct was to flinch away. There was a pause, a visceral chill that kept the two sides apart – the space between them carpeted with the dead and dying – then the Seventh did the unexpected. In a silence that raised the hair on the historian's nape, they rushed forward, the box bulging, distorting into an oval, pikes levelled.

Enemy ranks crumbled, melted, suddenly broke.

Stop! Too far! Too thin! Stop!

The oval stretched, paused, then drew back with a measured precision that was almost sinister – as if the Seventh had become some kind of mechanism. *And they'll do it again. Little surprise the* next *time, but likely just as deadly. Like a lung drawing breath, a rhythm of calm sleep, again and again.*

His attention was snared by movement among the Foolish Dog. Nil and Nether had emerged from the front line, on foot, the latter leading a Wickan mare. The animal's head was high, ears pricked forward. Sweat glistened on its ruddy flanks.

The two warlocks halted to either side of the mare, Nether leaving the reins to dangle, and laid hands on the beast.

A moment later Duiker was stumbling, as the rear lines of the wedge were pulled forward, up the ramp, as if carried on an indrawn breath.

'Ready close weapons!' a sergeant shouted nearby.

Oh, Hood's wet dream—

'This is it,' List said beside him, his voice as taut as a bowstring.

There was no time for a reply, no time for thought itself, for suddenly they were among the enemy. Duiker caught a flash of the scene before him. A soldier stumbling and cursing, his helm slipped down over his eyes. A sword flying through the air. A shrieking Semk warrior being pulled backward by his braid, his scream cut to a wet gurgle as the point of a short sword burst from under his chest amidst a coiled mass of intestines. A woman marine wheeling from an attack, her own urine splattering the tops of her boots. And everywhere ... Togg's three masks and a cacophony of noise, throats making sounds they were never meant to make, blood gushing, people dying – *everywhere, people dying.*

'Ware your right!'

Duiker recognized the voice – his nameless marine companion – and pivoted in time to parry a spear blade, his short sword skittering along the tin-sheathed shaft. He stepped in past the thrust and drove his sword point into a Semk woman's face. She sank down in red ruin, but it was the historian's cry of pain that ripped the air, a savage piercing of his soul. He stumbled back and would have fallen if not for a solid shield thudding against his back. The unnamed woman's voice was close by his ear. 'Tonight I'll ride you till you beg, old man!'

In that baffling twist that was the human mind, Duiker mentally wrapped himself around those words, not in lust, but as a drowning man clings to a mooring pole. He drew a sobbing breath, straightened away from the shield's support, stepped forward.

Ahead battled the front line of marines, horribly thinned, yielding step after step as the Guran heavy infantry pushed down the slope. The wedge was about to shatter.

Semk warriors ranged in the midst of the marines in wild, frenzied mayhem, and it was these ash-stained warriors that the rear ranks had been driven forward to deal with.

The task was quickly done, brutal discipline more than a match for individual warriors who held no line, offered no support weapon-side, and heard no voice except their own manic battle cries.

For all that sudden deliverance, the marines began to buckle.

Three horns sounded in quick, braying succession: the Imperial call to split. Duiker gaped, spun round to look for List – but the corporal was nowhere in sight. He saw his marine companion and staggered over to her. 'Four's the withdraw, were there four blasts? I heard—'

She bared her teeth. 'Three, old man. Split! Now!'

She pulled away. Baffled, Duiker followed. The slope was treacherous, blood- and bile-soaked mud over shifting cobbles. They stumbled with the others this side of the divide – the south – towards the high bank, and descended into the narrow ditch, finding themselves ankle-deep in a stream of blood.

The Guran heavy infantry had paused, sensing a trap – no matter how improbable events had made that possibility – as they shuffled to close ranks four strides down from the crest. A ram's horn bleated, pulling the formation back to the summit in ragged back-step.

Duiker turned in time to see, seventy paces farther down the ramp, the Foolish Dog heavy cavalry edging forward, parting around Nil and Nether, who still stood on either side of the stationary mare, their hands pressed against the animal.

'Lord's push,' cursed the woman at his side.

They mean to charge up this ramp, with its bodies and wreckage and mud and stones. A slope steep *enough to force the riders onto their mounts' necks – and all that weight onto their forelegs. Coltaine* means them to *charge. Into the face of heavy infantry*— 'No!' the historian whispered.

Rocks and sand pattered down the bank. Around Duiker helmed heads turned in sudden alarm – someone was on the bank's top. More dirt slewed down on them.

A stream of Malazan curses sounded from above, then a helmed head peered over the edge.

'It's a Hood-damned sapper!' one of the marines grunted.

The dirt-smeared face above them grinned. 'Guess what turtles do in the winter?' he shouted down, then pulled back and out of sight.

Duiker glanced back at the Foolish Dog horsewarriors. Their forward motion had ceased, as if suddenly uncertain. The Wickans had their heads raised, gazes fixed on the tops of the banks to either side.

The Guran heavy infantry and surviving Semk stared as well.

Through the dust rolling down the ramp from the crest, Duiker squinted towards the north bank. Activity swarmed along it – sappers, wearing shields on their backs, had begun moving forward, dropping down onto the ramp in the body-piled space below the crest.

Another horn sounded, and the Foolish Dog horsewarriors rolled forward again, pushing their mounts into a trot, then a clambering canter. But now a company of sappers blocked their path to the ridge.

A turtle burrows come winter. The bastards snuck onto the banks last night – under the very *noses of Reloe – and buried them.' selves. What in Hood's name for?*

The sappers, still wearing their shields on their backs, milled about, preparing weapons and other gear. One stepped free to wave the Foolish Dog riders forward.

The ramp trembled.

The armour-clad horses surged up the steep slope in an explosion of muscle, swifter than the historian thought possible. Broadswords lifted skyward. In their arcane, bizarre armour, the Wickans sat their saddles like demonic conjurations above equally nightmarish mounts.

The sappers rushed the Guran line. Grenados flew, followed by the rap of explosions and dreadful screams.

Every munition left to the sappers arced a path into the press of heavy infantry. Sharpers, burners, flamers. The solid line of Reloe's elite soldiers disintegrated.

The Foolish Dog's galloping charge reached the sappers, who went down beneath the hooves in resounding clangs that beat a dreadful rhythm as horse after horse surged over them.

Into the gutted, chaotic maelstrom that had moments before been a solid line of heavy infantry, the Wickan horse-warriors cleared the crest and plunged, broadswords swinging down in fearful slaughter.

Another signal wailed above the din.

The woman at Duiker's side rapped a gauntleted hand against his chest. 'Forward, old man!'

He took a step, then hesitated. Aye, *time for the soldier to go forward. But I'm a historian – I have to see, I have to witness, and to Hood with arrow-fire!* 'Not this time,' Duiker said, turning to scramble his way up the embankment.

'See you tonight!' she shouted after him, before joining the rest of the marines as they marched forward.

Duiker pulled himself to the top, gaining a mouthful of sandy earth in the bargain. Coughing and gagging, he pushed himself to his feet, then looked around.

The bank's flat surface was honeycombed with angled shafts. Cocoons of tent cloth lay half in, half out of some of the man-sized holes. The historian stared at them a moment longer in disbelief, then swung his attention to the ramp.

The marines' forward momentum had been stalled by the retrieval of the trampled sappers. There were broken bones aplenty, Duiker could see, but the shields – now battered into so much scrap – and their dented helms had for the most part protected the crazed soldiers.

Beyond the crest, on the flatland to the west, the Foolish Dog horsewarriors pursued the routed remnants of Kamist Reloe's vaunted elites. The commander's own tent, situated on a low hill a hundred paces from the crest, was sinking beneath flames and smoke. Duiker suspected that the rebel High Mage had set that fire himself, destroying anything of potential

use to Coltaine before fleeing through whatever paths his warren offered him.

Duiker turned to survey the basin.

The battle down there still raged. The Seventh's ring of defence around the wagons of the wounded remained, though distorted by a concerted, relentless push from the Ubari heavy infantry on the northern side. The wagons themselves were rolling southward. Tepasi and Sialk cavalry harried the rear guard, where the Hissari Loyals stood fast... and died by the score.

We could lose this one yet.

A double blast of horns from the crest commanded the Foolish Dog's recall. Duiker could see Coltaine, his black feather cape grey with dust, sitting astride his charger on the crest. The historian saw him gesture to his staff and the recall horns sounded again, in quicker succession. *We need you now!*

But those mounts will be spent. They did the impossible. They charged uphill, with a speed that grew and grew, with a speed like nothing I have ever seen before. The historian frowned, then spun around.

Nil and Nether still stood to either side of the lone mare. A light wind was ruffling the beast's mane and tail, but it did not otherwise move. A ripple of unease chilled Duiker. *What have they done?*

Distant howling caught the historian's attention. A large mounted force was crossing the river, their standards too distant to discern their identity. Then Duiker spied small tawny shapes streaming out ahead of the riders. *Wickan cattle' dogs. That's the Weasel Clan.*

The horsewarriors broke into a canter as they cleared the river bed.

The Tepasi and Sialk cavalry were caught completely unawares, first by a wave of ill-tempered dogs that ignored horses to fling themselves at riders, sixty snarling pounds of teeth and muscle dragging soldiers from their saddles, then by the Wickans themselves, who announced their arrival by

launching severed heads through the air before them and raising an eerie, blood-freezing cry a moment before striking the cavalry's flank.

Within a score of heartbeats the Tepasi and Sialk riders were gone – dead or dying or in full flight. The Weasel horsewarriors barely paused in re-forming before wheeling at a canter to close with the Ubari, the mottle-coated cattle-dogs loping alongside them.

The enemy broke on both sides, flinching away with a timing that, although instinctive, was precise.

Foolish Dog riders poured back down the ramp, parting around the warlocks and their motionless horse, then wheeling to the south in pursuit of the fleeing Halafan and Sialk infantry and the Tithansi archers.

Duiker sank to his knees, suddenly overwhelmed, his emotions a cauldron of grief, anger and horror. Speak *not of victory this day. No, do not speak at* all.

Somone stumbled onto the bank, breath ragged. Footsteps dragged closer, then a gauntleted hand fell heavily on the historian's shoulder. A voice that Duiker struggled to identify spoke. 'They mock our noble-born, did you know that, old man? They've a name for us in Dhebral. You know what it translates into? The Chain of Dogs. Coltaine's Chain of Dogs. He leads, yet is led, he strains forward, yet is held back, he bares his fangs, yet what nips at his heels if not those he is sworn to protect? Ah, there's profundity in such names, don't you think?'

The voice was Lull's, yet altered. Duiker raised his head and stared into the face of the man crouched beside him. A single blue eye glittered from a ravaged mass of torn flesh. A mace had caught him a solid blow, driving the cheek guard into his face, shattering cheek, bursting one eye and tearing away the captain's nose. The horrifying ruin that was Lull's face twisted into something like a grin. 'I'm a lucky man, Historian. Look, not a single tooth knocked out – not even a wobble.'

The count of losses was a numbing litany to war's futility. To the historian's mind, only Hood himself could smile in triumph.

The Weasel Clan had awaited the Tithansi lancers and the godling commander who led them. An ambush by earth spirits had taken the Semk warleader down, tearing his flesh to pieces in their hunger to rip apart and devour the Semk god's remnant. Then the Weasel Clan had sprung their own trap, and it had held its own horror, for the refugees had been the bait, and hundreds had been killed or wounded in the trap's clinical, cold-blooded execution.

The Weasel Clan's warleaders could claim that they had been outnumbered four to one, that some among those they were sworn to protect had been sacrificed to save the rest. All true, and providing a defensible justification for what they did. Yet the warleaders said nothing, and though that silence was met with outrage by the refugees and especially by the Council of Nobles, Duiker saw it in a different light. The Wickan tribe held voiced reasons and excuses in contempt – they accepted none from others and were derisive of those who tried. And in turn, they offered none, because, Duiker suspected, they held those who were sacrificed – and their kin – in a respect that could not survive something so base and self-serving as its utterance.

It was unfortunate for them that the refugees understood none of this, that for them the Wickans' silence was in itself an expression of contempt, a disdain for the lives lost.

The Weasel Clan had, however, offered yet another salute to those refugees who had died. With the slaughter of the Tithansi archers in the basin added to the Weasel Clan's actions, an entire plains tribe had effectively ceased to exist. The Wickans' retribution had been absolute. Nor had they stopped there, for they had found Kamist's peasant army, arriving late to the battle from the east. The slaughter exacted there was a graphic revelation of the fate the Tithansi sought to inflict on the Malazans. This lesson, too, was lost on the refugees.

For all that scholars tried, Duiker knew there was no explanation possible for the dark currents of human thought that roiled in the wake of bloodshed.

He need only look upon his own reaction, when stumbling down to where Nil and Nether stood, their hands gummed with congealing sweat and blood on the flanks of a mare standing dead. Life forces were powerful, almost beyond comprehension, and the sacrifice of one animal to gift close to five thousand others with appalling strength and force of will was on the face of it worthy and noble.

If not for a dumb beast's incomprehension at its own destruction beneath the loving hands of two heartbroken children.

The Imperial Warren's horizon was a grey shroud on all sides. Details were blurred behind the gauze of the still, thick air. No wind stirred, yet echoes of death and destruction remained, suspended as if trapped outside time itself.

Kalam settled back in his saddle, eyes on the scene before him.

Ashes and dust shrouded the tiled dome. It had collapsed in one place, revealing the raw edges of the bronze plates that covered it. A grey haze lay over the gaping hole. From the dome's curvature, it was clear that less than a third of it was above the surface.

The assassin dismounted. He paused to pluck at the cloth wrapped over his nose and mouth to loosen the caked grit, glanced back at the others, then approached the structure.

Somewhere beneath their feet stood a palace or a temple. Reaching the dome, the assassin leaned forward and brushed the ash from one of the bronze tiles. A deeply carved symbol revealed itself.

A breath of cold recognition swept through him. He had last seen that stylized crown on another continent, in an unexpected war against resistance that had been purchased by desperate enemies. *Caladan Brood and Anomander Rake, and the Rhivi and the Crimson Guard. A gathering of disparate foes to challenge the Mahzan Empire's plans for conquest. The Free Cities of Genabackis were a squabbling, back-stabbing lot. Gold-hungry rulers and thieving factors squealed loudest at the threat to their freedom . . .*

His mind over a thousand leagues away, Kalam lightly touched the engraved sigil. *Blackdog . . . we were warring against mosquitoes and leeches, poisonous snakes and blood-sucking lizards. Supply lines cut, the Moranth putting back when we needed them the most . . . and this sigil I remember, there on a ragged standard, rising above a select company of Brood's forces.*

What did that bastard call himself? The High King? Kallor . . . the High King without a kingdom. Thousands of years old, if legends speak true, perhaps tens of thousands. He claimed to have once commanded empires, each one making the Malazan Empire no larger than a province. He then claimed to have destroyed them by his own hand, destroyed them utterly. Kallor boasted he had made worlds lifeless ...

And this man now stands as Caladan Brood's second in command. And when I left, Dujek, the Bridgeburners and the reformed Fifth Army were about to seek an alliance with Brood.

Whiskeyjack . . . Quick Ben . . . keep your heads low, friends. There's a madman in your midst. . .

'If you're done daydreaming ...'

'The thing I hate most about this place,' Kalam said, 'is how the ground swallows footfalls.'

Minala's startling grey eyes were narrow above the scarf covering the lower half of her face as she studied the assassin. 'You look frightened.'

Kalam scowled, turning back to the others. He raised his voice. 'We're leaving this warren now.'

'What?' Minala scoffed. 'I see no gate!'

No, but it feels right. We've covered enough distance, and I've suddenly realized that the power of deliberation is not as much in the travelling as in the arriving. He closed his eyes, shutting Minala and everyone else out as he forced his mind into stillness. One final thought escaped: *I hope I'm right.*

A moment later a portal formed, making a tearing sound as it spread wider.

'You thick-headed bastard,' Minala snapped with sharp comprehension. 'A little discussion might have led us to this a little sooner – unless you were deliberately delaying our progress. Hood knows what you're about, Corporal.'

Interesting choice of words, woman. I imagine he does.

Kalam opened his eyes. The gate was an impenetrable black stain a dozen paces away. He grimaced. *As simple as that. Kalam, you* are *a thick-headed bastard. Mind you, fear can focus even the most insipid of creatures.*

'Follow closely,' the assassin said, loosening the long-knife in its sheath before striding towards the portal and plunging through.

His moccasins slid on sandy cobbles. It was night, stars bright overhead through the narrow slit between two high brick buildings. The alley wound on ahead in a tortuous path that Kalam knew well. There was no-one in sight.

The assassin moved to the wall on his left. Minala appeared, leading her own horse and Kalam's. She blinked, head turning. 'Kalam? Where—'

'Right here,' the assassin replied.

She started, then hissed in frustration. 'Three breaths in a city and you're already skulking.'

'Habit.'

'No doubt.' She led the horses farther on. A moment later Keneb and Selv appeared, followed by the two children.

The captain glared around until he spotted Kalam. 'Aren?'

'Aye.'

'Damned quiet.'

'We're in an alley that winds through a necropolis.'

'How pleasant,' Minala remarked. She gestured at the buildings flanking them. 'But these look like tenements.'

'They are ... for the dead. The poor stay poor in Aren.'

Keneb asked, 'How close are we to the garrison?'

'Three thousand paces,' Kalam replied, unwinding the scarf from his face.

'We need to wash,' Minala said.

'I'm thirsty,' Vaneb said, still astride his horse.

'Hungry,' added Kesen.

Kalam sighed, then nodded.

'I hope,' added Minala, 'a walk through dead streets isn't an omen.'

'The necropolis is ringed by mourners' taverns,' the assassin muttered. 'We won't have much of a walk.'

Squall Inn claimed to have seen better days, but Kalam suspected it never had. The floor of the main room sagged like an enormous bowl, tilting every wall inward until angled wooden posts were needed to keep them upright. Rotting food and dead rats had with inert patience migrated to the floor's centre, creating a mouldering, redolent heap like an offering to some dissolute god.

Chairs and tables stood on creatively sawed legs in a ring around the pit, only one still occupied by a denizen not yet drunk into senselessness. A back room no less disreputable provided the more privileged customers with some privacy, and it was there that Kalam had deposited his group to eat while a washtub was being prepared in the tangled garden. The assassin had then made his way to the main room and sat himself down opposite the solitary conscious customer.

'It's the food, isn't it?' the grizzled Napan said as soon as the assassin took his seat.

'Best in the city.'

'Or so voted the council of cockroaches.'

Kalam watched the blue-skinned man raise the mug to his lips, watched his large Adam's apple bob. 'Looks like you'll have another one.'

'Easily.'

The assassin twisted slightly in his chair, caught the drooped gaze of the old woman leaning against a support post beside the ale keg, raised two fingers. She sighed, pushed herself upright, paused to adjust the rat-cleaver tucked through her apron belt, then went off in search of two tankards.

'She'll break your arm if you paw,' the stranger said.

Kalam leaned back and regarded the man. He could have been anywhere between thirty and sixty, depending on his life's toll. Deeply weathered skin was visible beneath the iron-streaked snarl of beard. The dark eyes roved restlessly and had yet to fix on the assassin. The man was dressed in baggy, threadbare rags. 'You force the question,' the assassin said. 'Who are you and what's your story?'

The man straightened up. 'You think I tell that to just anyone?'

Kalam waited.

'Well,' the man continued. 'Not everyone. Some people get rude and stop listening.'

An unconscious patron at a nearby table toppled from his chair, his head crunching as it struck the flagstones. Kalam, the stranger and the serving woman – who had just reappeared with two tin mugs – all watched as the drunk slid down on grease and vomit to join the central heap.

It turned out one of the rats had been just playing at being dead, and it popped free and clambered onto the patron's body, nose twitching.

The stranger opposite the assassin grunted. 'Everyone's a philosopher.'

The serving woman delivered the drinks, her peculiar shuffle to their table displaying long familiarity with the pitched floor. Eyeing Kalam, she spoke

in Dhebral. 'Your friends in the back have asked for soap.'

'Aye, I imagine they have.'

'We got no soap.'

'I have just realized that.'

She wandered away.

'Newly arrived, I take it,' the stranger said. 'North gate?'

'Aye.'

'That's quite a climb, with horses yet.'

'Meaning the north gate's locked.'

'Sealed, along with all the others. Maybe you arrived by the harbourside.'

'Maybe.'

'Harbour's closed.'

'How do you close Aren Harbour?'

'All right, it's not closed.'

Kalam took a mouthful of ale, swallowed it down and went perfectly still.

'Gets even worse after a few,' the stranger said.

The assassin set the tankard back down on the table. He struggled a moment to find his voice. 'Tell me some news.'

'Why should I?'

'I've bought you a drink.'

'And I should be grateful? Hood's breath, man, you've tasted it!'

'I'm not usually this patient.'

'Oh, very well, why didn't you say so?' He finished the first tankard, picked up the new one. 'Some ales grow on you. Some grow *in* you. To your health, sir.' He quaffed the ale down.

'I have slit uglier throats than yours,' the assassin said.

The man paused, his eyes flicking for the briefest of moments to skitter over Kalam, then he set his tankard down. 'Kornobol's wives locked him out last night – the poor bastard was left wandering the streets till one of the High Fist's patrols picked him up for breaking curfew. It's becoming common practice. Wives all over the city are having revelations. What else? Can't get a decent fillet without paying an arm and a leg for it – there's more maimed beggars than ever crowding the streets where the markets used to be. Can't buy a reading without Hood's Herald poking up on the field – tell me, do you think it's even possible that the High Fist is casting someone else's shadow like they say? Of course, who can cast a shadow hiding in the palace wardrobe? Fish ain't the only slippery things in this city, let me tell you. Why, I've been arrested four times in the last two days, had to identify myself and show my Imperial charter, if you can believe it. Turned out lucky, though, since I found my crew in one of those gaols. With Oponn's smile I'll have them out come tomorrow – got a deck to scrub and believe you me, those drunken louts will be scrubbing till the Abyss swallows the world. What's worse is the way some people step right around that charter, make demands of a person so he's left with an aching head delivering messages beneath common words, as if life's not complicated enough – any idea how a hold groans when it's full of gold? And now you're going to say, "Well, Captain, it just so happens that I'm looking to buy passage back to Unta," and I'll say, "The gods are smiling upon you, sir! It just so happens that I'm sailing in two days' time, with twenty marines, the High Fist's treasurer and half of Aren's riches on board – but we've room, sir, oh, yes indeed. Welcome aboard!"'

Kalam was silent for a dozen heartbeats, then he said, 'The gods are smiling indeed.'

The captain's head bobbed. 'Smooth and beguiling, them smiles.'

'Who do I thank for this arrangement?'

'Says he's a friend of yours, though you've never met – though you will aboard my ship, *Ragstopper,* in two days.'

'His name?'

'Salk Elan, he called himself. Says he's been waiting for you.'

'And how did he know I would come to this inn? I did not know of its existence an hour ago.'

'A guess, but an informed one. Something about this being the first one you come to down from the gate in the necropolis. Too bad you weren't here last night, friend, it was even quieter, at least until the wench fished a drowned rat out of that keg over yonder. Too bad you and your friends missed this morning's breakfast.'

Kalam slammed the rickety door behind him, pausing to regain control. *Quick Ben's arrangements? Not likely. Impossible, in fact—*

'What's wrong?' Minala was sitting at the table, a wedge of melon in one hand. Voices from the garden indicated parents bathing reluctant children.

The assassin closed his eyes for a long moment, then opened them with a sigh. 'You've been delivered to Aren – and now we must go our separate ways. Tell Keneb to go out until he finds a patrol or one finds him, and then make his report to the City Guard's commander – leaving me entirely out of that report—'

'And how does he explain us getting into the city?'

'A fisherman brought you in. Keep it simple.'

'And that's it? You won't even say goodbye to Keneb, or Selv, or the children? You won't even let them show their gratitude for saving their lives?'

'If you can, Minala, get yourself and your kin out of Aren – go back to Quon Tali.'

'Don't do it like this, Kalam.'

'It's the safest way.' The assassin hesitated, then said, 'I wish it could have been .. . different.'

The wedge of melon caught him flush on one cheek. He spent a moment wiping his face, then picked up his saddlebags and threw them over one shoulder. 'The stallion's yours, Minala.'

In the main room, Kalam made his way to the captain's table. 'All right, I'm ready.'

Something like disappointment flickered in the man's eyes, then he sighed and tottered upright. 'So you say. It's a middling long walk to where *Ragstopper's* moored – with luck I'll only have to show my charter a dozen or so times. Hood knows, what else do you do with an army camped in a city, eh?'

'That rag of a shirt you're wearing won't help matters, Captain. I imagine you're looking forward to ditching the disguise.'

'What disguise? This is my lucky shirt.'

Lostara Yil leaned back against the wall of the small room, her arms crossed as she watched Pearl pacing back and forth near the window.

'Details,' he muttered, 'it's all in the details. Don't blink or you might miss something.'

'I must report to the Red Blade commander,' Lostara said. 'Then I shall return here.'

'Will Orto Setral give you leave, lass?'

'I am not relinquishing this pursuit ... unless you forbid me.'

'Gods forbid! I enjoy your company.'

'You are being facetious.'

'Only slightly. Granted, you've displayed little ease of humour. However, we have shared quite an adventure thus far, have we not? Why end it now?'

Lostara examined her uniform. Its weight was a comfort – the armour she had worn when disguised was a shattered mess and she had happily

discarded it after the Claw's healing of her wounds.

Pearl had offered nothing to relieve the mystery of the demon that had appeared during the night engagement out on the plain, but it was clear to the Red Blade that the incident still troubled the man. As *it does me, but that is past now. We have made it to Aren, still on the assassin's trail. All is as it should be.*

'Will you wait here for me?' she asked.

Pearl's smile broadened. 'Until the end of time, my dear.'

'Dawn will suffice.'

He bowed. 'I shall count the heartbeats until then.'

She left the room, shutting the door behind her. The inn's hallway led to a wooden staircase that took her into the crowded main room. The curfew made for a captive clientele, although the mood was anything but festive.

Lostara ducked under the staircase and passed through the kitchen. The eyes of the cook and her helpers followed her as she walked to the back door, which had been left ajar to provide a draught. It was a reaction she was used to. The Red Blades were much feared.

She pushed open the door and stepped out into the alley. The river's breath, mingled with the salt of the bay, was cool against her face. *I pray I never travel the Imperial Warren again.*

She walked to the main street, her boots loud on the cobbles.

A dozen soldiers of the High Fist's army accosted her as she reached the first intersection on her way to the garrison compound. The sergeant commanding them stared at her with disbelief.

'Good evening, Red Blade,' he said.

She nodded. 'I understand that the High Fist has imposed a curfew. Tell me, do the Red Blades patrol the streets as well?'

'Not at all,' the sergeant replied.

There was an expectancy among the soldiers that Lostara found vaguely disturbing.

'They are tasked with other responsibilities, then?'

The sergeant slowly nodded. 'I imagine they are. From your words and from ... other things, I gather you are newly arrived.'

She nodded.

'How?'

'By warren. I had an ... an escort.'

'The makings of an interesting story, no doubt,' the sergeant said. 'I will have your weapons now.'

'Excuse me?'

'You wish to join your fellow Red Blades, yes? Speak with Commander Orto Setral?'

'Yes.'

'By the High Fist's order, issued four days ago, the Red Blades are under detention.'

'What?'

'And await trial for treason against the Malazan Empire. Your weapons, please.'

Stunned, Lostara Yil made no resistance as the soldiers disarmed her. She stared at the sergeant. 'Our loyalty has been ... challenged?'

There was no malice in his eyes as he nodded. 'I am sure your commander will have more to say on the situation.'

'He's gone.'

Keneb's jaw dropped. 'Oh,' he managed after a moment. Frowning, he watched Minala packing her gear. 'What are you doing?'

She whirled on him. 'Do you think he gets away leaving it like that?'

'Minala—'

'Be quiet, Keneb! You'll wake the children.'

'I wasn't shouting.'

'Tell your commander everything, you understand me? Everything – except about Kalam.'

'I am not stupid, no matter what you may think.'

Her glare softened. 'I know. Forgive me.'

'You'd better ask that of your sister, I think. And Kesen and Vaneb.'

'I will.'

'Tell me, how will you pursue a man who does not want to be pursued?'

A hard grin flashed on her dark features. 'You ask that of a woman?'

'Oh, Minala .. .'

She reached up to brush his cheek with one hand. 'No need for tears, Keneb.'

'I blame my sentimental streak,' he said with a weary smile. 'But know this, I shall remain hopeful. Now, go and say goodbye to your sister and the children.'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Goddess drew breath,
and all was still..

The Apocalypse
Herulahn

'We can't stay here.'

Felisin's eyes narrowed on the mage. 'Why not? That storm outside will kill us. There's no sheltering from it – except here, where there's water ... food—'

'Because we're being hunted,' Kulp snapped, wrapping his arms around himself.

From where he sat against a wall, Heboric laughed. He raised his invisible hands. 'Show me a mortal who is not pursued, and I'll show you a corpse. Every hunter is hunted, every mind that knows itself has stalkers. We drive and are driven. The unknown pursues the ignorant, the truth assails every scholar wise enough to know his own ignorance, for that is the meaning of unknowable truths.'

Kulp looked up from where he sat on the low wall encircling the fountain, the lids of his eyes heavy as he studied the ex-priest. 'I was speaking literally,' he said. 'There are living shapeshifters in this city – their scent rides every wind and it's getting stronger.'

'Why don't we just give up?' Felisin said.

The mage sneered.

'I am not being flippant. We're in Raraku, the home of the Whirlwind. There won't be a friendly face within a hundred leagues of here, not that there's a chance of making it that far in any case.'

'And the faces closer at hand aren't even human,' Heboric added. 'Every mask unveiled, and you know, the presence of D'ivers and Soletaken is most likely *not* at the Whirlwind's beckoning. All a tragic coincidence, this Year of Dryjhna and the unholy convergence—'

'You're a fool if you think that,' Kulp said. 'The timing is anything but accidental. I've a hunch that someone *started* those shapeshifters on that convergence, and that someone acted precisely because of the uprising. Or it went the other way around – the Whirlwind goddess guided the prophecy to ensure that the Year of Dryjhna was now, when the convergence was under way, in the interest of creating chaos within the warrens.'

'Interesting notions, Mage,' Heboric said, slowly nodding. 'Natural, of course, coming from a practitioner of Meanas, where deceit breeds like runaway weeds and inevitability defines the rules of the game ... but only when useful.'

Felisin stayed silent, watching the two men. *One conversation, here on the surface, yet another beneath. The priest and the mage are playing games, the entwining of suspicion with knowledge. Heboric sees a pattern, his plundering of ghostly lives gave him what he needed, and I think he's telling Kulp that the mage himself is closer to that pattern than he might imagine. 'Here, wielder of* Meanas, *take my invisible hand . . .'*

Felisin decided she had had enough. 'What do you know, Heboric?'

The blind man shrugged.

'Why does it matter to you, lass?' Kulp growled. 'You're suggesting surrender: let the shapeshifters take us – we're dead anyway.'

'I asked, why do we struggle on? Why leave here? We haven't got a chance out in the desert.'

'Stay, then!' Kulp snapped, rising. 'Hood knows you've nothing useful to offer.'

'I've heard all it takes is a bite.'

He went still and slowly turned to her. 'You heard wrong. It's common enough ignorance, I suppose. A bite can poison you, a cyclical fever of madness, but you do not become a shapeshifter.'

'Really, then how *are* they created?'

'They aren't. They're born.'

Heboric clambered to his feet. 'If we're to walk through this dead city, let us do so now. The voices have stilled, and I am clear of mind.'

'What difference does that make?' Felisin demanded.

'I can guide us on the swiftest route, lass. Else we wander lost until the ones who hunt us finally arrive.'

They drank one last time from the pool, then gathered as many of the pale fruits as they could carry. Felisin had to admit to herself that she felt healthier – more *mended* – than she had in a long time, as if memories no longer bled and she was left with naught but scars. Yet the cast of her mind remained fraught. She had run out of hope.

Heboric led them swiftly down tortuous streets and alleys, through houses and buildings, and everywhere they went, they trod over and around bodies, human, shapeshifter and T'lan Imass, ancient scenes of fierce battle. Heboric's plundered knowledge was lodged in Felisin's mind, a trembling of ancient horror that made every new scene of death they stumbled upon resonate within her. She felt she was close to grasping a profound truth, around which orbited all human endeavour since the very beginning of existence. *We do naught but scratch the world, frail and fraught. Every vast drama of civilizations, of peoples with their certainties and gestures, means nothing, affects nothing.* Life *crawls on, ever on.* She wondered if the gift of revelation – of discovering the meaning underlying humanity – offered nothing more than a devastating sense of futility. It's *the ignorant who find a cause and cling to it, for within that is the illusion of significance. Faith, a king, queen or Emperor, or vengeance . . . all the bastion of fools.*

The wind moaned at their backs, raising small gusts of dust at their feet, rasping like tongues against their skin. It carried in it a faint scent of spice.

Felisin judged an hour had passed before Heboric paused. They stood before the grand entrance to a temple of some kind, where the columns, squat and broad, had been carved into a semblance of tree trunks. A frieze ran beneath the cracked, sagging plinth, each panel a framed image which Kulp's warren-cast light eerily lit from beneath.

The mage was staring up at the images. Hood's *breath!* he mouthed.

The ex-priest was smiling.

'It's a Deck,' Kulp said.

Yet another pathetic assertion of order.

'The Elder Deck, aye,' Heboric nodded. 'Not Houses but Holds. Realms. Can you discern Death and Life? And Dark and Light? Do you see the Hold of the Beast? Who sits upon that antlered throne, Kulp?'

'It's empty, assuming I'm looking at the one you mean – the frame displays various creatures. The throne is flanked by T'lan Imass.'

'Aye, that is the one. No-one on the throne, you say? Curious.'

'Why?'

'Because every echo of memory tells me there *used* to be.'

Kulp grunted. 'Well, it's not been defaced – you can see the back of the throne, and it looks as weathered as everywhere else.'

'There should be the Unaligned – can you detect those?'

'No. Perhaps around the sides and back?'

'Possibly. Among them you'll find Shapeshifter.'

'All very fascinating,' Felisin drawled. 'I take it we're to enter this place – since that's where the wind is going.'

Heboric smiled. 'Aye. The far end shall provide our exit.'

The interior of the temple was nothing more than a tunnel, its walls, floor and ceiling hidden behind packed layers of sand. The wind raised its voice the farther in they went. Forty paces later they could discern pale ochre light ahead.

The tunnel narrowed, the howling wind making it difficult to resist being pushed forward headlong, and they were forced to duck into a shambling crouch near the exit point.

Heboric held back just before the threshold to let Kulp pass, then Felisin. The mage was the first to step outside; Felisin followed.

They stood on a ledge, the mouth of a cave high on a cliff face. The wind tore at them as if seeking to cast them out, flinging them into the air – and a fatal drop to jagged rocks two hundred or more arm-spans below. Felisin moved to grip one crumbling edge of the cave mouth. The vista had taken her breath away, weakened her knees.

The Whirlwind raged, not before them but beneath them, filling the vast basin that was the Holy Desert. A fine haze of suspended dust drifted above a floor of seething yellow and orange clouds. The sun was an edgeless ball of red fire to the west, deepening its hue as they watched.

After a long moment Felisin barked a laugh. 'All we need now is wings.'

'I become useful once again,' Heboric said, grinning as he stepped out to stand beside her.

Kulp's head whipped around. 'What do you mean?'

'Tie yourselves to my back – both of you. This man's got a pair of hands and he can use them, and for once my blindness will prove a salvation.'

Kulp peered down the cliff face. 'Climb down this? It's rotten rock, old man—'

'Not the handholds I'll find, Mage. Besides, what choice do you have?'

'Oh, I simply can't wait,' Felisin said.

'All right, but I'll have my warren open,' Kulp said. 'We'll fall just as far, but the landing will be softer – not that it'll make much difference, I suppose, but at least it gives us a chance.'

'You have no faith!' Heboric shouted, his face twisting as he fought back peals of laughter.

'Thanks for that,' Felisin said. *How far do we have to be pushed? We're not slipping into madness, we're being nudged, tugged and pulled into it.*

A hot, solid pressure closed on her shoulder. She turned. Heboric had laid an invisible hand on her – she could see nothing, yet the thin weave of her shirt's fabric was compressed, slowly darkening with sweat. She could feel its weight. He leaned close. 'Raraku reshapes all who come to it. This is one truth you can cling to. What you were falls away, what you become is something different.' His smile broadened at her snort of disdain. 'Raraku's gifts are harsh, it's true,' he said in a tone of sympathy.

Kulp was readying harnesses. 'These straps are rotting,' he said.

Heboric swung to him. 'Then you must hold tight.'

'This is madness.'

Those were my words.

'Would you rather await the D'ivers and Soletaken?'

The mage scowled.

Heboric's body felt like gnarled tree roots. Felisin clung with trembling muscles, not trusting the straining leather straps. Her gaze remained fixed on the ex-priest's wrists – the unseen hands themselves were plunged into the rock face – while below she heard his feet scrambling for purchase again and again. The old man was carrying the weight of the three of them with his hands and arms alone.

The battered cliff was bathed in the setting sun's red glare. As *if we're descending into a cauldron of fire, into some demonic realm. And this is a*

one-way trip – Raraku will claim us, devour us. The sands will bury every dream of vengeance, every desire, every hope. We *will all of us drown, here in this desert.*

Wind slapped them against the cliff face, then yanked them outward in a biting swirl of airborne sand. They had entered the Whirlwind once again. Kulp shouted something lost in the battering roar. Felisin felt herself being pulled away, raised up horizontal by the frantic, hungry wind. She hooked one arm around Heboric's right shoulder.

Her muscles began shuddering with the strain, her joints burning like fanned coals. She felt the harness straps around her tightening as they slowly, inevitably, assumed the strain. Hopeless. *The gods mock us at every turn.*

Heboric continued the climb downward, into the heart of the maelstrom.

From inches away, Felisin watched as the blowing sand began abrading the skin stretched over her elbow joint. The sensation was nothing more than that of a cat's tongue, yet the skin was peeling back, vanishing.

Her legs and body rode the wind, and from everywhere she felt that dreadful rasp of the storm's tongue. I *will be nothing but bones and sinew when we reach bottom, tottering fleshless with a rictus grin. Felisin unveiled in all her glory ...*

Heboric stepped away from the cliff face. The three of them fell in a heap onto a ragged floor of rocks. Felisin screamed as the stones and sand pressed hard against the ravaged skin of her back. She found herself staring back up the cliff, revealed in patches where the gusting sand momentarily thinned. She thought she saw a figure, fifty arm-spans above them, then it was swallowed once more by the storm.

Kulp tugged at the straps with frantic haste. Felisin rolled clear, pushing herself onto her hands and knees. *There's something . . . even I can feel it—*

'On your feet, lass!' the mage shouted. 'Quickly!'

Whimpering, Felisin struggled upright. The wind slapped her back down in a lash of pain. Warm hands closed on her, lifted her up into the crook of

rope-muscled arms.

'Life's like that,' Heboric said. 'Hold tight.'

They were running, leaning into the raging wind. She squeezed shut her eyes, the agony of her flayed skin flashing like lightning behind her eyelids. Hood *take this!* AM *of it!*

They stumbled into sudden calm. Kulp hissed his surprise.

Felisin opened her eyes on a motionless mist of dust, describing a sphere in the midst of the Whirlwind. A large, vague shape was tottering towards them through the haze. The air was redolent with citrus perfume. She struggled until Heboric set her down.

Four pale men in rags were carrying a palanquin on which sat, beneath an umbrella, a vast, corpulent figure wearing voluminous silks in a splash of discordant colours. Slitted eyes peered out from sweat-beaded folds of flesh. The man raised one bloated hand and the bearers halted.

'Perilous!' he squealed. 'Join me, strangers, and take leave of yon dangers – a desert filled with beasts of most unpleasant disposition. I offer humble sanctuary through artful sorcery invested into this chair at great personal expense. Do you hunger? Do you thirst? Ahh, but look at the wounds upon the frail lass! I possess healing unguents, I would see such a delectable morsel with skin smoothed once again into youthful perfection. Tell me, is she perchance a slave? Might I make an offer?'

'I am *not* a slave,' Felisin said. *And I am no longer for sale.*

'The reek of lemon is making my blind eyes water,' Heboric whispered. 'I sense greed but no ill will. . .'

'Nor I,' Kulp said beside them. 'Only ... his porters are undead, not to mention strangely ... *chewed.'*

'I see you hesitate and I applaud caution at all times. Aye, my servants have seen better days, but they are harmless, I assure you,'

'How is it,' Kulp called out, 'you oppose the Whirlwind?'

'Not oppose, sir! I am a true believer and most humble. The goddess grants me ease of passage, for which I make constant propitiation! I am naught but a merchant, my trade is select merchandise – of the magical kind, that is. I am making my return journey to Pan'potsun, you see, after a lucrative venture to Sha'ik's rebel camp.' The man smiled. 'Aye, I know you as Malazans and no doubt enemies of the great cause. But cruel retribution finds no root in my soil, I assure you. And truth to tell, I would enjoy your company, for these dread servants are obsessed with their own deaths and there is no end to their complaints.'

At a gesture, the four bearers set the sedan chair down. Two of them immediately began removing camp gear from the storage rack behind the seat, their movements careless and loose, while the other pair set to levering their master onto his feet.

'There is a most potent salve,' the man wheezed. 'In yon wooden chest – there! The one called Nub carries it. Nub! Set that down, you gnawed grub! Nub the grub, hee! Leave off fumbling with the catch – such nimble escapades will melt your rotting brain. Aai! You've no hands!' The man's eyes had found Heboric, as if for the first time. 'A crime, to have done such a thing! Alas, none of my healing unguents could manage such complex regeneration.'

'Please,' Heboric said, 'do not feel distressed at what I lack, or even at what you lack. I've need for nothing, although this shelter from the wind is most welcome.'

'Yours is assuredly a tragic tale of abandonment, once-priest of Fener, and I shall not pry. And you –' the man swung to Kulp – 'forgive me, the warren of Meanas, perchance?'

'You do more than sell sorcerous trinkets,' Kulp growled, his face darkening.

'Long proximity, kind sir,' the man said, bowing his head. 'Nothing more, I assure you. I have devoted my life to magery, yet I do not practise it. The years have granted me a certain... sensitivity, that is all. My apologies if I

gave offence.' He reached out and cuffed one of his servants. 'You, what name did I give you?'

Felisin stared in fascination as the corpse's gnawed lips peeled back in a twisted grin. 'Clam, though I once knew myself as Iryn Thalar—'

'Oh, shut up with what you once knew! You are Clam now.'

'I had a horrid death—'

'Shut up!' his master shrieked, his face suddenly darkening.

The undead servant fell silent.

'Now,' the man gasped, 'find us that Falari wine – let us celebrate with the Empire's most civil gifts.'

The servant stumbled off. Its nearest companion's head swivelled to follow with desiccated eyes. 'Yours was not as horrid as mine—'

'The Seven Holies preserve us!' the merchant hissed. 'I beg of you, Mage, a spell of silence about these ill-chosen animations! I shall pay in jakata imperials, and pay well!'

'Beyond my abilities,' Kulp muttered.

Felisin's eyes narrowed on the cadre mage. *That has to be a lie.*

'Ah, well,' the man sighed. 'Gods below, I have not yet introduced myself! I am Nawahl Ebur, humble merchant of the Holy City Pan'potsun. And what names do you three wish to be known by?'

Oddly put.

'I'm Kulp.'

'Heboric.'

Felisin said nothing.

'While the lass is shy,' Nawahl said, his lips curving into an indulgent smile as he looked upon her.

Kulp crouched down at the wooden chest, released the catch and lifted the lid.

'The white clay bowl with the wax seal,' the merchant said.

The wind was a distant moan, the ochre dust of the calm slowly settling around them. Heboric, still gifted with an awareness that dispensed with the need for sight, sat down on a weathered boulder. A faint frown wrinkled his broad forehead, and his tattoos were dull beneath a veil of dust.

Kulp strode to Felisin, the bowl in one hand. 'It's a healing salve,' he affirmed. 'And potent indeed.'

'Why didn't the wind tear your skin, Mage? You've not got Heboric's protection—'

'I don't know, lass. I had my warren open – perhaps that was enough.'

'Why didn't you extend its influence over me?'

He glanced away. 'I thought I had,' he muttered.

The salve was cool and seemed to absorb the pain. Beneath its colourless patina, she saw her skin grow anew. Kulp applied it where she could not reach, and half a bowl later, the last flare of agony was healed. Suddenly exhausted, Felisin sat down on the sand.

A broken-stemmed glass of wine appeared before her face. Nawahl smiled down on her. 'This shall restore you, gentle lass. A pliant current will take the mind past suffering, into life's most peaceful stream. Here, drink, my dear. I care for your well-being most deeply.'

She accepted the glass. 'Why?' she demanded. 'Why do you care most deeply?'

'A man of my wealth can offer you much, child. All that you grant of your free will is my reward. And know, I am most gentle.'

She downed a mouthful of the tart, cool wine. 'Are you now?'

His nod was solemn, his eyes glittering between the folds of dimpled flesh. 'This I promise.'

Hood knows I could do worse. Riches and comfort, ease and indulgences. Durhang and wine. Pillows to lie on . . .

'I sense wisdom in you, my dear,' Nawahl said, 'so I shall not press. Let you, rather, yourself ascend to the proper course.'

Bedrolls had been laid out. One of the undead servants had fanned to life a camp stove, the remnants of one sleeve catching light and smouldering in the process, a detail none commented on.

Darkness swiftly closed in around them. Nawahl commanded the lighting of lanterns and their positioning on poles situated in a circle around the camp. One of the corpses stood beside Felisin and refilled her glass after every mouthful. The creature's flesh looked gnawed. Gaping bloodless wounds lined his pallid arms. All his teeth had fallen out.

Felisin glanced up at him, willing herself against recoiling. 'And how did you die?' she asked sardonically.

'Terribly.'

'But how?'

'I am forbidden to say more. I died terribly, a death to match one of Hood's own nightmares. It was long, yet swift, an eternity that passed in an instant. I was surprised, yet knowing. Small pain, yet great pain, the flood of darkness, yet blinding—'

'All right. I see your master's point.'

'So you shall.'

'Go easy on that, lass,' Kulp said from near the camp stove. 'Best have your wits about you.'

'Why? It's not availed me yet, has it?' In defiance, she drained the glass and held it up to be refilled. Her head was swimming, her limbs seeming to float. The servant splashed wine over her hand.

Nawahl had returned to his wide, padded chair, watching the three of them with a contented smile on his lips. 'Mortal company, such a

difference!' he wheezed. 'I am so much delighted, I need only bask in the mundane. Tell me, where do you seek to go? Whatever launched you on such a perilous journey? The rebellion? Is it truly as bloody as I have heard rumoured? Such injustice is ever repaid in full, alas. This lesson is lost, I am afraid.'

'We're going nowhere,' Felisin said.

'Might I convince you to revise your chosen destination, then?'

'And you offer protection?' she asked. 'How reliable? What happens if we run into bandits, or worse?'

'No harm shall come to you, my dear. A man who deals in sorcery has many resorts in defence of selves. Not once in all my travels have I been beset by nefarious fools. Accosted on occasion, yes, but all have turned away when I gifted them wisdom. My dear, you are positively breathtaking – your smooth, sun-honeyed skin is a balm to my eyes.'

'What would your wife say?' Felisin murmured.

'Alas, I am a widower. My dearest passed through the Hooded One's Gates almost a year ago to this day. Hers was a full, happy life, I am pleased to say – and that gives me great comfort. Ah, would that her spirit could arise and set you at ease with reassurances, my dear.'

Tapu skewers sizzled on the camp stove.

'Mage,' Nawahl said, 'you have opened your warren. Tell me, what do you see? Have I given you cause for mistrust?'

'No, merchant,' Kulp said. 'And I see nothing untoward – yet the spells surrounding us are High castings ... I am impressed.'

'Only the best in protection of oneself, of course.'

The ground trembled suddenly and something huge pushed a brown-furred shoulder into the sphere opposite Felisin. The beast's shoulder was almost three arm-lengths high. After a moment the creature growled and withdrew.

'Beasts! They plague this desert! But fear not, none shall defeat my wards. I urge calm.'

Calm, I am very calm. We're finally safe. Nothing can reach us—

Finger-long claws tore a swath down the sphere's blurry wall, a bellow of rage ripping forth to shiver the air.

Nawahl surged upright with surprising speed. 'Back, damned one! Away! One thing at a time!'

She blinked. *One thing at a time?*

The sphere glowed as the jagged tears closed. The apparition beyond bellowed again, this time in what was clearly frustration. Claws scored another path, which healed even as it appeared. A body thundered against the barrier, withdrew, then tried again.

'We are safe!' Nawahl cried, his face dark with fury. 'It shall not succeed, no matter how stubborn! But still, how shall we sleep in such racket!'

Kulp strode up to the merchant, who unaccountably backed away a step. The mage then turned to face the determined intruder. 'That's a Soletaken,' he said. 'Very strong—'

From where Felisin sat, all that followed appeared in a seamless flow, with something close to grace. As soon as Kulp swung his back to the merchant, Nawahl seemed to blur beneath his silks, his skin deepening into glistening black fur. Sharp spice overpowered the citrus perfume in a hot gust. Rats poured forth, a growing flood.

Heboric screamed a warning, but it was already too late. The rats flowed over Kulp and swallowed him entirely in a seething cloak, not by the score but in the hundreds.

The mage's shriek was a dull muffle. A moment later the mound of creatures seemed to buckle, their weight crushing Kulp down.

The four bearers stood off to one side, watching.

Heboric plunged into the mass of rats, his ghost-hands now glowing gauntlets of fire, one jade green, the other rust-red. Rats flinched away. Each one he grasped burned into black, mangled flesh and bone. Yet the swarm spread outward, more and more of the silent creatures, clambering over one another, heaving in waves over the ground.

They dissipated from the place where Kulp had lain. Felisin saw the flash of wet bones, a ragged raincape. She could not comprehend its significance.

The Soletaken beyond the wards was attacking the barrier in a frenzy. The torn wounds were slower in closing. A bear's paw and forearm, as wide around as Felisin's waist, plunged through a rent.

The rats rose in a writhing crest to sweep down on Heboric. Still screaming, the ex-priest staggered back.

A hand clutched Felisin's collar from behind and yanked her upright. 'Grab him and run, lass.'

Head spinning, she twisted around, to find herself staring up into Baudin's weathered face. He held in his other hand four of the lanterns. 'Get moving, damn you!' He pushed her hard towards the ex-priest, who was still stumbling back, the tide seething in pursuit. Behind Heboric, two tons of bear was pushing through the barrier.

Baudin leapt past Heboric, smashing one of the lanterns against the ground. Lamp oil sprayed in gushing streaks of flame.

A furious scream erupted from the rats.

The four servants broke into hacking laughter.

The crest crashed over Baudin, but they could not drag him down as they had Kulp. He swung the lanterns, shattering them. Fire leapt around him. A moment later he and hundreds of rats were engulfed in flames.

Felisin reached Heboric. The old man was sheathed in blood from countless small wounds. His sightless eyes seemed focused on an inner horror that matched the scene before them. Grasping an arm, she pulled him to one side.

The merchant's voice filled her mind. *Do not fear for yourself, my dear. Wealth and peace, every indulgence to sate your desires, and I am gentle – to those I choose, oh so gentle . . .*

She hesitated.

Leave to me this hard-skinned stranger and the old man, then I shall deal with Messremb, that foul, most rude Soletaken who so dislikes me . . .

Yet she heard pain in his words, an edge of desperation. The Soletaken was sundering the barrier, its hungry roar deafening in its reverberations.

Baudin would not fall. He killed rat after rat, all within a shroud of flame, yet they surged over him in ever-growing numbers, the sheer mass of bodies smothering the burning oil.

Felisin glanced at the Soletaken, gauging its awesome power, its fearless rage. She shook her head. 'No. You're in trouble, D'ivers.' She took hold of Heboric once again and dragged him to the dying barrier.

My dear! Wait! Oh, you stubborn mortal, why won't you die!

Felisin could not help but grin. *That won't work* – I *should know.*

The Whirlwind had begun its own assault against the sphere. Wind-whipped sand rasped against her face.

'Wait!' Heboric gasped. 'Kulp—'

Cold gripped Felisin. He's *dead, oh, gods, he's dead! Devoured. And I watched, drunk and uncaring, noticing nothing – 'one* thing *at a time.' Kulp's dead.* She bit back a sob, pushed the ex-priest into, then through, the barrier, even as it finally collapsed. The Soletaken's roar of triumph announced its surging charge into the midst of the rats. Felisin did not turn to watch the attack, did not turn to discover Baudin's fate. Dragging Heboric, she ran into the dusk-darkened storm.

They did not get far. The sandstorm's fury battered them, pushed them, finally drove them into the frail shelter offered by an overhanging spur of

rock. They collapsed at its base, huddling together, awaiting death.

The alcohol in Felisin pulled her down into sleep. She thought to resist it, then surrendered, telling herself that the horror would soon find them, and to witness her own death offered no comfort. I *should tell Heboric the true worth of knowledge now. Yet he will learn that himself. Not long. Not long at all...*

She awoke to silence, but no, not silence. Someone nearby was weeping. Felisin opened her eyes. The Whirlwind's storm had ceased. The sky overhead was a golden shroud of suspended dust. It was so thick on all sides that she could see no more than half a dozen paces. Yet the air was still. *Gods, the D'ivers is back* – but no, the calm was everywhere.

Head aching and mouth painfully dry, she sat up.

Heboric knelt a few paces away, vague behind a refulgent haze. Invisible hands were pressed against his face, pulling the skin into bizarre folds, as if he was wearing a grotesque mask. His whole body heaved with grief and he rocked back and forth with dull, senseless repetition.

Memory flooded Felisin. *Kulp.* She felt her own face twisting. 'He should have sensed something,' she croaked.

Heboric's head shot up, his sightless eyes red and hooded as they fixed on her. 'What?'

'The mage,' she snapped, wrapping herself in a frail hug. 'The bastard was a D'ivers. He *should have known!'*

'Gods, girl, would that I had your armour!'

And should I bleed within it, you see nothing, old man. No-one shall see. No-one shall know.

'If I had,' Heboric continued after a moment, 'I would be able to stay at your side, to offer what protection I could – though wondering why I bothered, granted. Yet I would.'

'What are you babbling about?'

'I am fevered. The D'ivers has poisoned me, lass. And it wars with the other strangers in my soul – I do not know if I shall survive this, Felisin.'

She barely heard him. Her attention had been pulled away by a scuffing sound. Someone was approaching, haltingly, a stagger and a scrape of pebbles. Felisin pushed herself to her feet to face the sound.

Heboric fell silent, his head cocked.

The figure that emerged from the ochre mist sank talons into her sanity. She heard a whimper from her own throat.

Baudin was burned, gnawed, parts completely eaten away. He had been charred down to the bone in places, and the heat had swelled the gases in his belly, bloating him until he looked with child, the skin and flesh cracked open. There was nothing left of his features except ragged holes where his eyes, nose and mouth should have been. Yet Felisin knew it was him.

He staggered another step closer, then slowly sank down to the ground.

'What is it?' Heboric demanded in a hiss. 'This time I am truly blind – who has come?'

'No-one,' Felisin said after a long moment. She walked slowly to the thing that had once been Baudin. She sank down into the warm sand, reached out and lifted his head, cradled it on her thighs.

He was aware of her, reaching up an encrusted, fused hand to hover a moment near her elbow before falling back. He spoke, each word like rope on rock. 'I thought... the fire ... immune.'

'You were wrong,' she whispered, an image of armour within her suddenly cracking, fissures spreading. And beneath it, behind it, something was building.

'My vow.'

'Your vow.'

'Your sister ...'

'Tavore.'

'She—'

'Don't. No, Baudin. Say nothing of her.'

He drew a ragged breath. 'You ...'

Felisin waited, hoping the life would flee this husk, flee it now, before—

'You ... were ... not what I expected ...'

Armour can hide anything until the moment it falls away. Even a child. Especially a child.

There was nothing to distinguish sky from earth. Gold stillness had embraced the world. Stones pattered down the trail as Fiddler pulled himself onto the crest, the clatter appallingly loud to his ears. *She's drawn breath. And waits.*

He wiped sweaty dust from his brow. Hood's *breath, this bodes ill.*

Mappo emerged from the haze ahead. The huge Trell's exhaustion made his walk more of a shamble than usual. His eyes were red-rimmed, the lines that bracketed his prominent canines were deeply etched into his weathered skin. 'The trail winds ever onward,' he said, crouching beside the sapper. 'I believe she's with her father now – they walk together. Fiddler . ..' He hesitated.

'Aye. The Whirlwind goddess ...'

'There is ... expectancy ... in the air.'

Fiddler grunted at the understatement.

'Well,' Mappo sighed after a moment, 'let us join the others.'

Icarium had found a flat stretch of rock surrounded by large boulders. Crokus sat with his back against stone, watching the Jhag laying out foodstuffs in the centre. The expression the young Daru swung to the sapper when he arrived belonged to a much older man. 'She's not turning back,' Crokus said.

Fiddler said nothing, unslinging his crossbow and setting it down.

Icarium cleared his throat. 'Come and eat, lad,' he said. 'The realms are overlapping, and all is possible ... including the unexpected. Distress over what has not yet happened avails you nothing. In the meantime, the body demands sustenance, and it will do none of us good if you've no reserves of energy when comes the time to act.'

'It's already too late,' Crokus muttered, but he clambered to his feet nonetheless.

'There is too much mystery in this path to be certain of anything,' Icarium replied. 'Twice we have travelled warrens – their aspects I cannot say. They felt ancient and fragmented, woven into the very rock of Raraku. At one point I smelled the sea...'

'As did I,' Mappo said, shrugging his broad shoulders.

'More and more,' Crokus said, 'her journey takes a tack where such things as rebirth become more probable. I am right in that, aren't I?'

'Perhaps,' Icarium conceded. 'Yet, this pensive air hints at uncertainty as well, Crokus. Be mindful of that.'

'Apsalar is not seeking to flee us,' Mappo said. 'She is lead' ing us. What significance should we place in that? With her godly gifts she could easily mask her trail – that shadow-wrought residue that, to Icarium and to myself, is as plain and undisguised as an Imperial road.'

'There might be something else besides,' Fiddler muttered. Faces swung his way. He drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. 'The lass knows our intent, Crokus – what Kalam and I had planned and what is still – as far as I know – being followed. She could well have taken the notion that by assuming the guise of Sha'ik, she can... indirectly... support our efforts. In a manner wholly her own rather than that of the god who once possessed her.'

Mappo smiled wryly. 'There is much you've held from myself and Icarium, soldier.'

'An Imperial matter,' the sapper said, not meeting the Trell's eyes.

'Yet one that sees advantage in this land's rebellion.'

'Only in the short run, Mappo.'

'In becoming Sha'ik reborn, Apsalar will not simply be engaging in a change of costume, Fiddler. The cause of the goddess will take hold of Apsalar's mind, her soul. Such visions and visitations will *change* her.'

'She may not realize that particular possibility, I'm afraid.'

'She's not a fool,' Crokus snapped.

'I'm not saying she is,' Fiddler replied. 'Like it or not, Apsalar possesses something of a god's arrogance – I was witness to the full force of that back on Genabackis, and I can see that its stain still resides within her. Consider her present decision to leave Iskaral's temple, alone, in pursuit of her father.'

'In other words,' Mappo said, 'you think she might believe she can withstand the influence of the goddess, even as she assumes the role of prophetess and warleader.'

Crokus scowled. 'My mind's tumbling from one thing to the next. What if the patron god of assassins has reclaimed her? What will it mean if the rebellion is suddenly led by Cotillion – and, by extension, Ammanas? The dead Emperor returns to wreak vengeance.'

There was silence. Fiddler had been gnawing on that possibility like an obsessed hound since it had occurred to him days earlier. The notion of a murdered Emperor turned Ascendant suddenly reaching out from the shadows to reclaim the Imperial throne was anything but a pleasant prospect. It was one thing seeking to assassinate Laseen – that was, in the end, a mortal affair. Gods ruling a mortal Empire, on the other hand, would draw other Ascendants, and in such a contest entire civilizations would be destroyed.

They finished their meal without another word spoken.

The dust filling the air refused to settle; it simply hung motionless, hot and lifeless. Icarium repacked the supplies. Fiddler strode over to Crokus.

'No value in fretting, lad. She's found her father, after all these years – there's something to be said for that, don't you think?'

The Daru's smile was wry. 'Oh, I've thought on that, Fid. And yes, I am happy for her, yet mistrustful. What should have been a wondrous reunion has been compromised. By Iskaral Pust. By Shadow's manipulation. It's soured everything—'

'However you may have envisioned it, Crokus, it belongs to Apsalar.'

The lad was silent for a long minute, then he nodded.

Fiddler retrieved his crossbow and slung it over one shoulder. 'At the very least, we've had a respite from Sha'ik's soldiers and the D'ivers and Soletaken.'

'Where is she leading us, Fid?'

The sapper shrugged. 'I suspect we'll find that out soon enough.'

The weathered man stood on the hump of rock, facing Raraku. The shroud of silence was absolute; he could hear his own heart, a steady, mindless rhythm in his chest. It had begun to haunt him.

Rocks skittered at his back, and a moment later the Toblakai appeared, dropping a brace of arm-long lizards onto the bleached bedrock. 'Everything's come out for a look around,' the giant youth rumbled. 'For once, a meal worth eating.'

The Toblakai was gaunt. His rages of impatience were gone, and Leoman was thankful for that, though he well knew that a withering of strength was the cause. *We wait until Hood comes to take us,* the huge barbarian had whispered a few days back, when the Whirlwind had burgeoned in renewed frenzy.

Leoman had had no answer to that. His faith was in tatters. Sha'ik's wrapped corpse still lay between the wind-sculpted stone gateposts. It had shrunk. The tent-cloth shroud had frayed in the ceaseless, clawing wind. The dry knobs of her joints protruded through the worn weave. Her hair,

which had continued to grow for weeks, had been pulled free and whipped endlessly in the storm.

Yet now a change had come. The Whirlwind held its immortal breath. The desert, which had been lifted entire from its bones of rock, filling the air, refused to settle.

The Toblakai saw this as the Whirlwind's death. Sha'ik's murder had triggered a prolonged tantrum, a defeated goddess rampaging in frustration and fury. Even as the rebellion spread its bloody cloak over Seven Cities, its heart was dead. The armies of the Apocalypse were the still-twitching limbs on a corpse.

Leoman, plagued with hunger-born visions and fevers, had begun a slow stumbling towards the same belief.

Yet.. .

'This meal,' the Toblakai said, 'will give us the strength needed, Leoman.'

For leaving. And where do we go? To the oasis in the centre of Raraku, where a dead woman's *army still waits? Are we the chosen deliverers of the news of tragic failure? Or do we abandon them? Set off for Pan'potsun, then on to Ehrlitan, a flight into anonymity?*

The warrior turned. His gaze travelled over the ground and came to rest on the Book of Dryjhna where it waited, unmarred by the Whirlwind, immune even to the dust that found its way into everything. *The power abides. Unquenched. When I look upon that tome, I know I* cannot *let go . . .*

'Blades in hand and unhanded in wisdom. Young, yet old, one life whole, another incomplete – she shall emerge renewed...' Did still-hidden truths remain within those words? Had his imagination – his wilful yearning – betrayed him?

The Toblakai squatted before the dead lizards, flipped the first one onto its back and set a knifeblade to its belly. 'I would go west,' he said. 'Into the Jhag 'Odhan ...'

Leoman glanced over. *The jhag Odhan, there to come face to face with other giants. The Jhag themselves. The Trell. More savages. The lad will feel right at home in that wasteland.* 'This is not over,' the warrior said.

The Toblakai bared his teeth, a hand plunging through the slit in the lizard's belly to re-emerge with slick entrails. 'This one's female. It's said the roe is good for fevers, isn't it?'

'I am not fevered.'

The giant said nothing, but Leoman saw a new set to his shoulders. The Toblakai had made a decision.

'Take what's left of your kill,' the warrior said. 'You'll need it more than I.'

'You jest, Leoman. You do not see yourself as I see you. You are skin on bones. You have devoured your own muscles. I see the skull behind the face when I look at you.'

'I am clear of mind nonetheless.'

The Toblakai grunted. 'A hale man would not say so with such certainty. Is that not the secret revelation of Raraku? "Madness is simply a state of mind."'

'The Sayings of the Fool are aptly named,' Leoman muttered, his voice falling away. A charge was filling the hot, motionless air. The warrior felt his heart beat faster, harder.

The Toblakai straightened, his huge hands smeared with blood.

The two men slowly turned to face the ancient gate. The black hair emerging from the bundled corpse stirred, the strands gently lifting. The suspended dust had begun to swirl beyond the pillars. Sparks winked in its midst, like jewels set in an ochre cloak.

'What?' the Toblakai asked.

Leoman glanced over at the Holy Book. Its hide cover glistened as if with sweat. The warrior took a step towards the gate.

Something was emerging from the dust cloud. Two figures, side by side, their arms locked around one another, staggering, heading straight towards the pillars – and the corpse lying between the bleached gateposts.

'Blades in hand and unhanded in wisdom . . .'

One was an old man, the other a young woman. Heart hammering in his chest, Leoman let his gaze fix on her. *So alike. Dark threat pours from her. Pain, and from pain, rage.*

There was a thump and a grate of stones beside the warrior. He turned to see the Toblakai on his knees, head bowed before the approaching apparitions.

Raising her head, the woman found first Sha'ik's wrapped corpse, then lifted her eyes higher to fix on Leoman and the kneeling giant. She halted, almost standing over the body, her long black hair rising as if with a static charge.

Younger. Yet the fire within . . . it's the same. Ah, my faith . . .

Leoman lowered himself to one knee. 'You are reborn,' he said.

The woman's low laugh was triumphant. 'So I am,' she said.

She shifted her grip on the old man, whose head hung down, his clothes nothing but rags. 'Help me with him,' she commanded. 'But beware his hands ...'

BOOK FOUR



DEADHOUSE GATES

Coltaine rattles slow
across the burning land.
The wind howls through the bones
of his hate-ridden command.
Coltaine leads a chain of dogs
ever snapping at his hand.

Coltaine's fist bleeds the journey home
along rivers of red-soaked sand.
His train howls through his bones
in spiteful reprimand.
Coltaine leads a chain of dogs
ever snapping at his hand.

Coltaine
A marching song of the Bonehunters

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A god walking mortal earth trails blood.

Sayings *of the Fool*
Thenys Bule

'The chain of dogs,' the sailor growled, his voice as dark and heavy as the air of the hold. 'Now there's a curse no man would wish upon his worst enemy. What, thirty thousand starving refugees? Forty? Sweat-jowled noble-born among 'em, too, bleating this and that. Coltaine's hourglass is about run out, I'd wager.'

Kalam shrugged in the gloom, his hands still running along the damp hull. *Name a ship* Ragstopper *and worry starts before you weigh anchor.* 'He's survived this long,' he muttered.

The sailor paused in his stacking of bales. 'Look at this, will ya? Three-fifths' stowage gone before e'en the food and water comes 'board. Korbolo Dom's collected Reloe and his army – added up with his own and making what? Fifty thousand swords in all? Sixty? The traitor will catch hold o' that chain at Vathar. Then with the tribes massing to the south, aye, Beru fend, that Wickan mongrel's all but done for.' The man grunted as he heaved another canvas-wrapped bale. 'Heavy as gold ... and that ain't no empty rumour, I'd say. That blob of whale grease calling himself High Fist has his nose up in the wind - look here, his seal's on everything. The rotten worm's turning tail with his loot. Why else is the Imperial Treasurer comin' 'board, hey? And twenty marines besides ...'

'You may have a point,' the assassin said, distracted. He'd yet to find a dry plank.

'You the caulker's man, then, eh? Got a woman here in Aren? Bet you wish you was comin' wi' us, hey? Mind you, we'll be cramped enough what

with the Treasurer and two perfumed elects.'

'Perfumed elects?'

'Aye, saw one of 'em come 'board not ten minutes ago. Smooth as rat-spit, that one, all airs and dainty but no amount of flower juice could hide the spunk, if you know what I mean.'

Kalam grinned in the darkness. *Not precisely, you old swab, but I can guess.* 'What of the other one?' he asked.

'I'd hazard the same, only I ain't seen him yet. Came 'board with the captain, I heard. Seven Cities blood, if you can believe that. That was before the captain sprung us from the harbour hole – not that we deserved to be arrested in the first place – Hood's breath, when a squad of soldiers comes on ya demanding this and that, it's only natural to put a fist in their mawks, hey? We wasn't ten paces from the gangplank – so much for shore leave!'

'Your last port of call?'

'Falar. Big red-haired women all gruff and muscle just like I like 'em. Ah, that was a time!'

'Your haul?'

'Weapons, in advance of Tavore's fleet. Rode the waves like a sow, let me tell you – like we're gonna do this one, too, all the way to Unta. Bulge the belly like that and your master's got wet hands and feet, hey? Good coin, though, I wager.'

Kalam straightened. 'There won't be time for a full refit,' he said.

'Never is, but Beru bless you – do what you can.'

The assassin cleared his throat. 'Sorry to say, you've got me as the wrong man. I'm not one of the caulker's men.'

The sailor paused over a bale. 'Hey?'

Kalam dried his hands on his cloak. 'I'm the other perfumed elect.'

There was silence from the other side of the hold, then a soft muttering, followed by, 'Beg your pardon, sir.'

'No need for that,' the assassin said. 'What's the likelihood of finding one of the captain's guests down here pressing the planks? I'm a cautious man and, alas, my nerves haven't been eased.'

'She ships, to be true,' the sailor said, 'but captain's got three dedicated hands on the pumps, workin' through every flip o' the glass, sir. And she'll ride any blow and that she has, more than once. Captain's got a lucky shirt, y'see.'

'I've seen it,' Kalam said, stepping over a row of chests each bearing the High Fist's seal. He made his way to the hatch, laid a hand on the ladder rail, then paused. 'What's the rebel activity out in the Sahul?'

'Gettin' hotter, sir. Bless them Marines, 'cause we won't be outrunnin' a scow on this run.'

'No escort?'

'Pormqual's commanded Nok's fleet to hold this harbour. We'll have cover crossing Aren Bay out to the edge of Dojal Hading Sea, at least.'

Kalam grimaced at that, but said nothing. He climbed the ladder to the main deck.

Ragstopper wallowed heavily at the Imperial berth. Stevedores and crewmen were busy with their tasks, making it difficult for the assassin to find a place out of anyone's path. He finally found a spot on the sterncastle near the wheel, from which he could observe. A huge Malazan transport, high in the water, sat on the opposite side of the broad stone dock. The horses it had brought from Quon had been unloaded an hour earlier, with only a dozen dockhands left behind with the task of removing the butchered remains of the animals that had not survived the lengthy journey. It was common practice to salt the meat from such losses, provided the ship's cutter pronounced it edible. The hides found innumerable uses on board. The dockhands were left with heads and bones and no shortage of eager buyers crowding the harbour front on the other side of the Imperial barrier.

Kalam had not seen the captain since the morning they had boarded, two days past. The assassin had been shown to the small stateroom Salk Elan had purchased for Kalam's passage, then promptly left to his own devices while the captain went off to manage the release of his gaoled crew.

Salk Elan ... I *weary of waiting to make your acquaintance . . .*

Voices barked from the gangplank and Kalam glanced over to see the captain arrive on deck. Accompanying him was a tall, stooped man of middle years, his hatchet face painfully thin, his gaunt cheeks powdered light blue in some recent court fashion, and wearing oversized Napan sea gear. This man was flanked by a pair of bodyguards, both huge, their red faces buried in black, snarled beards and rudely plaited moustaches. They wore pot helms with bridge-guards, full shirts of mail, and broad-bladed tulwars at their hips. Kalam was unable to guess at their cultural origins. Neither the bodyguards nor their master stood comfortably on the mildly rocking deck.

'Ah,' said a soft voice behind the assassin, 'that would be Pormqual's treasurer.'

Startled, Kalam turned to find the speaker leaning against the stern rail. A *knife's thrust away.*

The man smiled. 'You were well described indeed.'

The assassin studied the stranger. He was lean, young, dressed in a loose, sickly green silk shirt. His face was handsome enough, though a touch too sharp-featured to be called friendly. Rings glittered on his long fingers. 'By whom?' Kalam snapped, disconcerted by the man's sudden appearance.

'Our mutual friend in Ehrlitan. I am Salk Elan.'

'I have no friends in Ehrlitan.'

'Poor choice of word, then. One who was indebted to you, and to whom I was in turn indebted, with the result that I was tasked with arranging your departure from Aren, which I have now done, thus freeing me of further obligations – which has proved timely, I might add.'

Kalam could see no obvious weapons on the man, which told him plenty. He sneered. 'Games.'

Salk Elan sighed. 'Mebra, who entrusted you with the Book, which was duly delivered to Sha'ik. You were bound for Aren, or so Mebra concluded. He further suspected that, with your, uh, talents, you were determined to take the Holy Cause into the heart of the Empire. Or rather, *through* one heart in particular. Among other preparations, I arranged for a tripwire of sorts to be set at the Imperial Warren's gate, which when activated would immediately trigger various prearranged events.' The man swung his head, scanning the sprawling rooftops of the city. His smile broadened. 'Now, as it turned out, my activities in Aren have been curtailed somewhat of late, making such arrangements difficult to maintain. Even more disconcerting, a bounty has been placed on my head – all a dreadful misunderstanding, I assure you, yet I've little faith in Imperial justice, especially when the High Fist's own Guard are involved. Hence, I booked not one berth but two – the cabin opposite yours, in fact.'

'The captain does not strike me as a man with cheap loyalties,' Kalam said, struggling to conceal his alarm – *If Mebra worked out I was planning to kill the Empress, who else might have? And this Salk Elan, whoever he is, clearly doesn't know when to shut up . . . unless, of course, he's fishing for a reaction. Besides, there's a classic tactic that might be at work here. No time to test veracity when you're reeling . . .*

The treasurer's high-pitched voice wheedled up from the main deck behind him, in varied complaints flung at the captain – who if he made reply did so under his breath.

'No, not cheap,' Salk Elan agreed. 'Nonexistent would be more accurate.'

Kalam grunted, both disappointed at the failed feint and pleased that he'd heard confirmation of his assessment of the captain's character. Hood's *breath, Imperial charters aren't worth the oilskin they're written on these days ...*

'Yet another source of consternation,' Elan continued, 'the man's far above average in wits, and seems to find his only intellectual stimulus in gestures

of subterfuge and obfuscation. No doubt he went overboard – as it were – in his mysterious meeting with you at the inn.'

Kalam grinned in spite of himself. 'No wonder I took an instant liking to him.'

Elan's laugh was soft, yet appreciative. 'And it should be no surprise that I so look forward to our meals at his table each night of this pending voyage.'

Kalam held his smile as he said, 'I'll not make the mistake of leaving my back open to you again, Salk Elan.'

'You were distracted, of course,' the man said, unperturbed. 'I do not expect such a potential opportunity to recur.'

'I'm glad we're understood, because your explanation thus far has more leaks than this ship.'

'Glad? Such understatement, Kalam Mekhar! I am *delighted* we're so clearly understood!'

Kalam stepped to one side and glanced back down at the main deck. The treasurer was continuing his tirade against the captain. The crew was motionless, all eyes on the scene.

Salk Elan tsked. 'An appalling breach of etiquette, wouldn't you say?'

'Ship's command is the captain's,' the assassin said. 'If he'd the mind to, he'd have put a halt to things by now. Looks to me like the captain's letting this squall run out.'

'Nonetheless, I suggest you and I join the proceedings.'

Kalam shook his head. 'Not our business and there's no value in making it so. Mind you, don't let my opinion stop you.'

'Ah, but it is our business, Kalam. Would you have *all* the passengers tarred by the crew? Unless you enjoy the cook's spit in your gruel, that is.'

The *bastard has a point.*

He watched Salk Elan step casually down to the main deck, and, after a moment, followed suit.

'Noble sir!' Elan called out.

The treasurer and his two bodyguards all turned.

'I trust you are fully appreciative of the captain's patience,' Elan continued, still approaching. 'On most ships you and your effete servants would be over the side by now, and at least two of you would have sunk like ballast stones – a most pleasing image.'

One of the bodyguards growled and edged forward, a large, hairy hand closing on the grip of his tulwar.

The treasurer was strangely pale beneath the sealskin hood, his face showing not a drop of sweat despite the heat and the heavy swaths of the Napan raincloak covering his thin frame. 'You insolent excuse for a crab's anus!' he squealed. 'Roll back into your hole, blood-smeared turd, before I call on the harbour magistrate to throw you in chains!' The man raised one pallid, long-fingered hand. 'Megara, beat this man senseless!'

The bodyguard with his hand on his weapon stepped forward.

'Belay that!' the captain bellowed. Half a dozen sailors closed in, moving between the moustached bodyguard and Salk Elan. Pins and knives waved about menacingly. The bodyguard hesitated, then backed away.

The captain smiled, anchoring his hands on his hips. 'Now,' he said in a quiet, reasonable tone, 'me and the coin-stacker will resume our discussion in my cabin. In the meantime, my crew will help these two servants out of their Hood-damned chain and stow it somewhere safe. Said servants will then bathe and ship's cutter will examine them for vermin – which I don't tolerate 'board *Ragstopper* – and when the delousing's done they can help load the last of their master's provisions, minus the leadwood bench which we'll donate to the customs officer to ease our departure. Finally, any further cursing on this ship – no matter how inventive – comes from me and no-one else. That, gentlemen, will be all.'

If the treasurer intended a challenge, it was pre-empted by his sudden collapse onto the deck. The two bodyguards spun about at the loud thump, then stood stock still, staring down at their unconscious master.

After a moment, the captain said, 'Well, not all, it seems. Get the coin-stacker below and get him out of those sealskins. Ship's cutter has more work to do, and we ain't even cast off yet.' He swung to Salk Elan and Kalam. 'Now, you two gentlemen can join me in my cabin.'

The room was not much larger than the assassin's own, and almost empty of possessions. It was a few minutes before the captain managed to find three tankards into which he poured local sour ale from a clay jug. Without offering a toast, the man drained half his tankard's contents, then wiped his mouth with the back of one hand. His eyes roved restlessly, not once settling on the two men before him. 'The rules,' he said, grimacing. 'Simple. Stay out of the treasurer's way. The situation is ... confused. With the Admiral under arrest—'

Kalam choked on the ale, then managed to rasp, 'What? By whose command?'

The captain was frowning down at Elan's shoes. 'That would be the High Fist's, of course. No other means, you see, of keeping the fleet in the bay.'

'The Empress—'

'Probably doesn't know. There's been no Claw in the city for months – no-one knows why.'

'And their absence,' Elan said, 'gives implicit authority to Pormqual's decisions, I take it.'

'More or less,' the captain conceded, his eyes now fixed on a crossbeam. He finished his ale, poured more. 'In any case, the High Fist's personal treasurer has arrived with a writ granting him commander status for this voyage, meaning he has the privilege of overriding me if he so chooses. Now, while I hold an Imperial charter, neither me nor my ship and crew are

actually in the Imperial Navy, which leaves things, like I said earlier, confused.'

Kalam set his tankard down on the room's lone table. 'Right opposite us is an Imperial transport ship, getting ready to leave as much as we are. Why in Hood's name hasn't Pormqual sent his treasurer and his loot there? It's bigger and better defended, after all—'

'So it is. And it has indeed been commandeered by the High Fist, and will depart for Unta shortly after we do, loaded with Pormqual's household and his precious breeding stallions, meaning it will be very crowded, and rank to boot.' He shrugged as if his shoulders had been tugged upwards by invisible hands. He glanced nervously towards the door before returning his somewhat desperate gaze to the cross-beam overhead. *'Ragstopper's* fast when she has to be. Now, that's all. Drink up. The marines will board any moment now, and I mean for us to cast off within the hour.'

In the companionway outside the captain's cabin, Salk Elan shook his head and muttered, 'He couldn't have been serious.'

The assassin eyed the man. 'What do you mean?'

'The ale was atrocious. "Drink up" indeed.'

Kalam scowled. 'No Claw in the city – now why would that be?'

The man's shrug was loose. 'Aren's not its old self, alas. Filled with monks and priests and soldiers, the gaols crowded with innocents while Sha'ik's fanatics – only the most cunning left alive, of course – spread murder and mayhem. It's also said the warrens aren't what they used to be, either, though I gather you know more about that than I.' Elan smiled.

'Was that an answer to my question?'

'And am I an expert on the activities of the Claw? Not only have I never run into one of those horrid throat-slitters, I make it policy that my curiosity about them is thoroughly curtailed.' He brightened suddenly. 'Perhaps the

treasurer will not survive his heat prostration! Now there's a pleasing thought!'

Kalam swung about and made his way to his cabin. He heard Salk Elan sigh, then head in the opposite direction, ascending the companionway ladder to the main deck.

The assassin closed the door behind him and leaned against it. *Better to walk into a trap that you can see than one you can't.* Yet the thought gave him scant comfort. He wasn't even sure if there *was* a trap. Mebra's web was vast – Kalam had always known that, and had himself plucked those strands more than once. Nor, it seemed, had the Ehrlitan spy betrayed him when it came to delivering the Book of Dryjhna – Kalam had placed it into Sha'ik's hands, after all.

Salk Elan was likely a mage, and he also had the look of a man capable of handling himself in a fight. He had not so much as flinched when the treasurer's bodyguard had closed on him.

None of which puts me at ease.

The assassin sighed. *And the man knows bad ale when he tastes it. . .*

When the High Fist's breeding stallions were led through the gate into the Imperial yard, chaos ensued. Stamping, nervous horses jostled with stablers, dockhands, soldiers and various officials. The Master of the Horse shrieked and ran about in an effort to impose some order, fomenting even more confusion in the seething press.

The woman holding the reins of one magnificent stallion was notable only for her watchful calm, and when the Master finally managed to arrange the loading, she was among the first to lead her charge up the broad gangplank onto the Imperial transport. And though the Master knew every one of his workers and every one of the breeders in his care, his attention was so tugged and strained in multiple directions that he did not register that both woman and horse were unknown to him.

Minala had watched *Ragstopper* cast off two hours earlier, following the boarding of two squads of marines and their gear. The trader was towed clear of the inside harbour before being allowed to stretch sails, flanked by Imperial galleys that would provide escort crossing Aren Bay. Four similar warships awaited the Imperial transport a quarter-league out.

The complement of Marines aboard the Imperial transport was substantial, at least seven squads. Clearly, the Dojal Hading Sea was not secure.

Kalam's stallion tossed his head as he stepped down onto the main deck. The massive hatch that led down into the hold was in fact an elevator, raised and lowered by winches. The first four horses had been led onto the platform.

An old, grizzled stabler standing near Minala eyed her and the stallion. 'The latest in the High Fist's purchases?' he asked.

She nodded.

'Magnificent animal,' the man said. 'He's a good eye, has the High Fist.'

And not much else worth mentioning. The bastard's making a show of his imminent flight, *and when he finally leaves, he'll have an entire fleet of warships for escort, no doubt. Ah, Keneb, is this what we've delivered you to?*

Get out of Aren, Kalam had said. She'd urged the same to Selv before saying goodbye, but Keneb was among the army's ranks now. Attached to Blistig's City Garrison. They were going nowhere.

Minala suspected she would never see any of them again.

All to chase a man I don't understand. A man I'm not even sure I like. Oh, woman, you're old enough *to know better. . .*

The southern horizon ran in a thin, grey-green vein that wavered in the streams of heat rising from the road. The land that stretched before it was

barren, studded with stones except along the path of the potsherd-strewn trader track that branched out from the Imperial Road.

The vanguard sat their horses at the crossroads. To the east and southeast lay the coast, with its clustering of villages and towns and the Holy City of Ubaryd. The skyline in that direction was bruised with smoke.

Slumped in his saddle, Duiker listened with the others as Captain Sulmar spoke.

'—and the consensus on this is absolute, Fist. We've no choice but to hear Nethpara and Pullyk out. It is, after all, the refugees who will suffer the most.'

Captain Lull grunted his contempt.

Sulmar's face paled beneath the dust, but he went on, 'Their rations are at starvation level as it is – oh, there'll be water at Vathar, but what of the wasteland beyond?'

Bult raked fingers through his beard. 'Our warlocks say they sense nothing, but we are still distant – a forest and a wide river between us and the drylands. It may be that the spirits of the land down there are simply buried deep – Sormo has said as much.'

Duiker glanced at the warlock, who offered nothing and who sat wrapped in an Elder's cloak atop his horse, his face hidden beneath the hood's shadow. The historian could see the now constant tremble in Sormo's long-fingered hands where they rested on the saddlehorn. Nil and Nether were still recovering from their ordeal at Gelor Ridge, not once emerging from the covered wagon that carried them, and Duiker had begun to wonder whether they still lived at all. *Our last three mages, and two of them are either dead or too weak to walk, while the third has aged ten years for every week of this Hood-cursed journey.*

'The tactical advantages must be clear to you, Fist,' Sulmar said after a moment. 'No matter how sundered Ubaryd's walls may be, they'll provide a better defence than a land devoid even of hills—'

'Captain!' Bult barked.

Sulmar subsided, lips pressing into a thin, bloodless line.

Duiker shivered in response to a chill that had nothing to do with the dying day's slow cooling. *Such a vast concession, Sulmar, according to a Wickan war chief the rules of courtesy expected from one of lower rank. What skin is this that's wearing so thin on you, Captain? No doubt quickly cast off when you sup wine with Nethpara and Pullyk Alar . . .*

Coltaine did not take Sulmar to task. He never did. He met every jibe and dig of noble-born presumption and arrogance in the same manner that he dealt with everything else: cold indifference. It may well have worked for the Wickan, but Duiker could see how bold it was making Sulmar and others like him.

And the captain was not finished. 'This is not just a military concern, Fist. The civil element of the situation—'

'Promote me, Commander Bult,' Lull said, 'so that I may whip this dog until his hide's just a memory.' He bared his teeth at his fellow captain. 'Otherwise, a word with you somewhere private, Sulmar ...'

The man replied with a silent sneer.

Coltaine spoke. 'There is no civil element. Ubaryd will prove a fatal trap should we retake it. Assailed from the land and the sea, we would never hold. Explain that to Nethpara, Captain, as your last task.'

'My last task, sir?'

The Fist said nothing.

'Last,' Bult rumbled. 'Means just that. You've been stripped of rank, drummed out.'

'Begging the Fist's pardon, but you cannot do that.'

Coltaine's head turned and Duiker wondered if the captain had finally got to the Fist.

Sulmar shrugged. 'My Imperial commission was granted by a High Fist, sir. Based on that, it is within my right to ask for adjudication. Fist Coltaine,

it has always been the strength of the Malazan Army that a tenet of our discipline insists that we speak our mind. Regardless of your commands – which I will obey fully – I have the right to have my position duly recorded, as stated. If you wish, I can recite the relevant Articles to remind you of these rights, sir.'

There was silence, then Bult swung in his saddle to Duiker. 'Historian, did you understand any of that?'

'As well as you, Uncle.'

'Will his position be duly recorded?'

'Aye.'

'And presumably adjudication requires the presence of advocates, not to mention a High Fist.'

Duiker nodded.

'Where is the nearest High Fist?'

'Aren.'

Bult nodded thoughtfully. 'Then, to resolve this matter of the captain's commission, we must make all haste to Aren.' He faced Sulmar. 'Unless, of course, the views of the Council of Nobles are to take precedence over the issue of the fate of your career, Captain.'

'Retaking Ubaryd will allow relief from Admiral Nok's fleet,' Sulmar said. 'Through this avenue, a swift and safe journey to Aren can be effected.'

'Admiral Nok's fleet is in Aren,' Bult pointed out.

'Yes, sir. However, once news reaches them that we are in Ubaryd, the obvious course will be clear.'

'You mean they will hasten to relieve us?' Bult's frown was exaggerated. 'Now I am confused, Captain. The High Fist holds his army in Aren. More, he holds the entire Seven Cities fleet as well. Neither has moved in months. He has had countless opportunities to despatch either force to our aid. Tell me, Captain, in your family's hunting estates, have you ever seen a deer

caught in lantern light? How it stands, frozen, unable to do anything. The High Fist Pormqual is that deer. Coltaine could deliver this train to a place three miles up the coast from Aren and Pormqual would not set forth to deliver us. Do you truly believe that an even greater plight, such as you envisage for us in Ubaryd, will shame the High Fist into action?'

'I was speaking more of Admiral Nok—'

'Who is dead, sick or in a dungeon, Captain. Else he would have sailed long ere now. One man rules Aren, and one man alone. Will you place your life in his hands, Captain?'

Sulmar's expression had soured. 'It seems I have in either case, Commander.' He drew on his riding gloves. 'And it also seems that I am no longer permitted to venture my views—'

'You are,' Coltaine said. 'But you are also a soldier of the Seventh.'

The captain's head bobbed. 'I apologize, Fist, for my presumption. These are strained times indeed.'

'I wasn't aware of that,' Bult said, grinning.

Sulmar swung to Duiker suddenly. 'Historian, what are your views on all this?'

As an objective observer . . . 'My views on what, Captain?'

The man's mouth twitched into a smile. 'Ubaryd, or the River Vathar and the forest and wastes southward? As a civilian who knows well the plight of the refugees, do you truly believe they will survive such a fraught journey?'

The historian said nothing for a long minute, then he cleared his throat and shrugged. 'As ever, the greater of the threats has been the renegade army. The victory at Gelor Ridge has purchased for us time to lick our wounds—'

'Hardly,' Sulmar interjected. 'If anything, we have been pushed even harder since then.'

'Aye, we have, and for good reason. It is Korbolo Dom who now pursues us. The man was a Fist in his own right, and is a very able commander and tactician. Kamist Reloe is a mage, not a leader of soldiers – he wasted his army, thinking to rely upon numbers and numbers alone. Korbolo will not be so foolish. If our enemy arrives at the River Vathar before we do, we are finished—'

'Precisely why we should surprise him and recapture Ubaryd instead!'

'A short-lived triumph,' Duiker replied. 'We'd be left with two days at the most to prepare the city's defences before Korbolo's arrival. As you said, I am a civilian, not a tactician. Yet even I can see that retaking Ubaryd would prove suicidal, Captain.'

Bult shifted in his saddle, making a show of looking around. 'Let us find a cattle-dog, so that we may have yet another opinion. Sormo, where's that ugly beast that's adopted you? The one the marines call Bent?'

The warlock's head lifted slightly. 'Do you really wish to know?' His voice was a rasp.

Bult frowned. 'Aye, why not?'

'Hiding in the grass seven paces from you, Commander.'

It was inevitable that everyone began looking, including Coltaine. Finally, Lull pointed and, after peering for a moment longer, Duiker could make out a tawny body amidst the high prairie spikegrass. Hood's *breath!*

'I am afraid,' Sormo said, 'that he will offer little in the way of opinion, Uncle. Where you lead, Bent follows.'

'A true soldier, then,' Bult said, nodding.

Duiker guided his horse around on the crossroads, then looked back over the vast column stretching its length northward. The Imperial Road was designed for the swift travel of armies. It was wide and level, the cobbles displaying geometric precision. It could manage a troop of fifteen horsewarriors riding abreast. Coltaine's Chain of Dogs was over an Imperial

league long, even with the three Wickan clans riding the grasslands to either side of the road.

'Discussion is ended,' Coltaine announced.

Bult said, 'Report to your companies, captains.' It was not necessary to add, *We march for the River Vathar.* The command meeting had revealed positions, in particular Sulmar's conflicting loyalties, and beyond the mundane discussion of troop placement, supply issues and so on, nothing else was open to debate.

Duiker felt a wave of pity for Sulmar, realizing the level of pressure the man must be under from Nethpara and Pullyk Alar. The captain was noble-born, after all, and the threat of displeasure visited upon his kin made Sulmar's position untenable.

'The Malazan Army shall know but one set of rules,' Emperor Kellanved had proclaimed, during the first 'cleansing' and 'restructuring' of the military early in his reign. *'One set of rules, and one ruler . . .'* His and Dassem Ultor's imposition of merit as the sole means of advancement had triggered a struggle for control within the hierarchies of the Army and Navy commands. *Blood was spilled on the palace steps, and Laseen's Claw was the instrument of that surgery. She should have learned from that episode. We had our second cull, but it came far too late.*

Captain Lull interrupted Duiker's thoughts. 'Ride back with me, old man. There's something you should see.'

'Now what?'

Lull's grin was ghastly in his raw, ravaged face. 'Patience, please.'

'Ah, well, I've acquired that with plenty to spare, Captain.' *Waiting* to *die, and such a long wait it's been.*

Lull clearly understood Duiker's comment. He squinted his lone eye out across the plain, northwest, to where Korbolo Dom's army was, less than three days away and closing fast. 'It's an official request, Historian.'

'Very well. Ride on, then.'

Coltaine, Bult and Sormo had ridden down to the trader track. Voices shouted from the Seventh's advance elements as preparations began to leave the Imperial Road. Duiker saw the cattle-dog Bent loping ahead of the three Wickans. *And so we follow. We are indeed well named.*

'How fares the corporal?' Lull asked as they rode down the corridor towards Lull's company.

Duiker frowned. List had taken a vicious wound at Gelor Ridge. 'Mending. We face difficulties with the healers – they're wearing down, Captain.'

'Aye.'

'They've drawn so much on their warrens that it's begun to damage their own bodies – I saw one healer's arm snap like a twig when he lifted a pot from a hearth. That frightened me more than anything else I've yet to witness, Captain.'

The man tugged at the patch covering his ruined eye. 'You're not alone in that, old man.'

Duiker fell silent. Lull had nearly succumbed to a septic infection. He had become gaunt beneath his armour, and the scars on his face had set his features into a tortured expression that made strangers flinch. *Hood's breath, not just strangers. If the Chain of Dogs has a face, it is Lull's.*

They rode between columns of soldiers, smiled at the shouts and grim jests thrown their way, though for Duiker the smile was strained. It was well that spirits were high, the strange melancholy that came with victory drifting away, but the spectre of what lay ahead nevertheless loomed with monstrous certainty. The historian had felt his own spirits deepening to sorrow, for he'd long since lost the ability to will himself into blind faith.

The captain spoke again. 'This forest beyond the river, what do you know of it?'

'Cedar,' Duiker replied. 'Source of Ubaryd's fame in shipbuilding. It once covered both sides of the River Vathar, but now only the south side remains, and even that has dwindled close to the bay.'

'The fools never bothered replanting?'

'A few efforts, when the threat was finally recognized, but herders had already claimed the land. Goats, Captain. Goats can turn a paradise into a desert in no time at all. They eat shoots, they strip bark entirely around the boles of trees, killing them as surely as a wildfire. However, there's plenty of forest left upriver – we'll be a week or more travelling through it.'

'So I'd heard. Well, I'll welcome the shade ...'

A week or more, indeed. More like eternity – how does Coltaine defend his vast winding train amidst a forest, where ambushes will come from every direction, where troops cannot wheel and respond with anything like swiftness and order? Sulmar's concerns about the dry lands beyond the forest are moot, as far as I'm concerned. And I wonder if I'm alone in thinking that?

They rode between wagons loaded with wounded soldiers. The air was foul here with flesh rotting where forced healing had failed to stem the advance of infection. Soldiers in fever raved and rambled, delirium prying open the doors of their minds to countless other realms – *from* this *nightmare world into countless others. Only Hood's gift offers surcease . . .*

Off to their left on the flat grassland, the train's dwindling herds of cattle and goats moved amidst turgid clouds of dust. Wickan cattle-dogs patrolled the edges, accompanied by Weasel Clan riders. The entire herd would be slaughtered at the River Vathar, for the lands beyond the forest would not sustain them. For *there are no spirits of the land there.*

The historian found himself musing as he eyed the herd. The animals had matched them step for step on this soul-destroying journey. Month after month of suffering. *That is one curse we all share – the will to live.* Their fates had been decided, though thankfully they knew nothing of that. Yet *even* that *will change in* the *last moments. The dumbest of beasts seems capable of sensing its own impending death. Hood grants every living thing awareness at the* very *end. What mercy is that?*

'The horse's blood had burned black in its veins,' Lull said suddenly.

Duiker nodded, not needing to ask which horse the captain meant. *She carried them all, such a raging claim on her life force, it seared her from within.* Such thoughts took him past words, into a place of raw pain.

'It's said,' Lull went on, 'that their hands are stained black now. They are marked for ever more.'

As *am* I. He thought of Nil and Nether, two children curled foetally beneath the hood of the wagon, there in the midst of their silent kin. The *Wickans know that the gift of power is never free. They know enough not to* envy *the chosen among them, for power is never a game, nor are glittering standards raised to glory and wealth. They disguise nothing in trappings, and so we all see what we'd rather not, that power is cruel, hard as iron and bone, and it thrives on destruction.*

'I am falling into your silences, old man,' Lull said softly.

Duiker could only nod again.

'I find myself impatient for Korbolo Dom. For an end to this. I can no longer see what Coltaine sees, Historian.'

'Can you not?' Duiker asked, meeting the man's eye. 'Are you certain that what he sees is different from what you see, Lull?'

Dismay slowly settled on his twisted features.

'I fear,' Duiker continued, 'that the Fist's silences no longer speak of victory.'

'A match to your own growing silence, then.'

The historian shrugged. An entire *continent pursues us. We should not have lived this long. And I can take my thoughts no further than that, and am diminished by that truth.* All those *histories I've read . . . each an intellectual obsession with war, the endless redrawing of maps. Heroic charges and crushing defeats. We are all naught but twists of suffering in a river of pain. Hood's breath, old man, your words weary even yourself- why inflict them on others?*

'We need to stop thinking,' Lull said. 'We're well past that point. Now we simply exist. Look at those beasts over there. We're the same, you and I, the same as them. Struggling beneath the sun, pushed and ever pushed to our place of slaughter.'

Duiker shook his head. 'It is our curse that we cannot know the bliss of being mindless, Captain. You'll find no salvation where you're looking, I'm afraid.'

'Not interested in salvation,' Lull growled. 'Just a way to keep going.'

They approached the captain's company. In the midst of the Seventh's infantry stood a knot of haphazardly armed and armoured men and women, perhaps fifty in all. Faces were turned expectantly towards Lull and Duiker.

'Time to be a captain,' Lull muttered under his breath, his tone so dispirited that it stung the historian's heart.

A waiting sergeant barked out a command to stand at attention and the motley gathering made a ragged but deter-mined effort to comply. Lull eyed them for a moment longer, then dismounted and approached.

'Six months ago you knelt before purebloods,' the captain addressed them. 'You shied away your eyes and had the taste of dusty floors on your tongues. You exposed your backs to the whips and your world was high walls and foul hovels where you slept, where you loved, and gave birth to children who would face no better future. Six months ago I wouldn't have wasted a tin jakata on the lot of you.' He paused, nodding to his sergeant.

Soldiers of the Seventh came forward, each carrying folded uniforms. Those uniforms were faded, stained and restitched where weapons had pierced the cloth. Resting atop each pressed bundle was an iron sigil. Duiker leaned forward on his saddle to examine one more closely. The medallion was perhaps four inches in diameter, a circlet of chain affixed to a replica Wickan dog-collar, and in the centre was a cattle-dog's head – not snarling, simply staring outward with hooded eyes.

Something twisted inside the historian so that he barely managed to contain it.

'Last night,' Captain Lull said, 'a representative of the Council of Nobles came to Coltaine. They were burdened with a chest of gold and silver jakatas. It seems the nobles have grown weary of cooking their own food, mending their own clothes ... wiping their own asses—'

At another time such a comment would have triggered dark looks and low grumbling – just one more spit in the face to join a lifetime of others. Instead, the former servants laughed. *The antics of when they were children. Children no more.*

Lull waited for the laughter to fall away. 'The Fist said nothing. The Fist turned his back on them. The Fist knows how to gauge value ...' The captain paused, a slow frown descending on his scarred features. 'There comes a time when a life can't be bought by coin, and once that line's crossed, there's no going back. You are soldiers now. Soldiers of the Seventh. Each of you will join regular squads in my infantry, to stand alongside your fellow soldiers – and not one of them gives a damn what you were before.' He swung to the sergeant. 'Assign these soldiers, Sergeant.'

Duiker watched the ritual in silence, each issuing of uniform as a man or woman's name was called out, the squads coming forward to collect their new member. Nothing was overplayed, nothing was forced. The perfunctory professionalism of the act carried its own weight, and a deep silence enveloped the scene. The historian saw inductees in their forties, but none was unfit. Decades of hard labour and the culling of two battles had ensured a collection of stubborn survivors.

They will stand, and stand well.

The captain appeared at his side. 'As servants,' Lull softly rumbled, 'they might have survived, been sold on to other noble families. Now, with swords in their hands, they will die. Can you hear this silence, Duiker? Do you know what it signifies? I imagine you do, all too well.'

With *all that we do, Hood smiles.*

'Write of this, old man.'

Duiker glanced at the captain and saw a broken man.

At Gelor Ridge, Corporal List had leapt down into the ditch beside the earthen ramp to avoid a swarm of arrows. His right foot had landed on a javelin head thrust up through the dirt. The iron point had driven through the sole of his boot, then the flesh between his big toe and the next one along.

A small wound, naught but mischance, yet punctures were the most feared of all battle wounds. They carried a fever that seized joints, including those of the jaw, that could make the mouth impossible to open, closing the throat to all sustenance and bringing agonizing death.

The Wickan horsewives had experience of treating such injuries, yet their supply of powders and herbs had long since dwindled, leaving them with but one treatment – burning the wound, and the burning had to be thorough. The hours after the battle of Gelor Ridge, the air was foul with the stench of burned hair and the macabre, sweetly enticing smell of cooked meat.

Duiker found List hobbling in a circle with a determined expression on his thin, sweat-beaded face. The corporal glanced up as the historian approached. 'I can ride as well, sir, though for only an hour at a time. The foot goes numb and it's then that infection could return – or so I'm told.'

Four days ago the historian had walked alongside the travois that carried List, looking down on a young man that he was certain was dying. A harried Wickan horsewife had quickly checked on the corporal during the march. Duiker had seen a grim expression settle into her lined features as she probed with her fingers the swollen glands beneath List's sparsely bearded chin. Then she had glanced up at the historian.

Duiker recognized her then, and she him. *The woman who once offered me food.*

'It's not good,' he'd said.

She hesitated, then reached under the folds of her hide cloak to withdraw a knuckle-sized, misshapen object that looked to Duiker like nothing more than a knob of mouldy bread. 'A jest of the spirits, no doubt,' she said in

Malazan. Then she bent down, grasped List's injured foot – which had been left unbandaged and open to the hot, dry air – and pressed the knob against the puncture wound, binding it in place with a strip of hide.

A jest *to make Hood frown.*

'You should be ready to rejoin the ranks soon, then,' Duiker now said.

List nodded, approached. 'I must tell you something, sir,' he said quietly. 'My fever showed me visions of what's ahead—'

'That happens sometimes.'

'A god's hand reached out from the darkness, grasped my soul and dragged it forward, through days, weeks. Historian—' List paused to wipe the sweat from his brow – 'the land south of Vathar ... we're going to a place of old truths.'

Duiker's gaze narrowed. 'Old truths? What does that mean, List?'

'Something terrible happened there, sir. Long ago. The earth – it's lifeless —'

That is something only Sormo and the High Command know. 'This god's hand, Corporal, did you see it?'

'No, but I felt it. The fingers were long, too long, with more joints than there should be. Sometimes that grip comes back, like a ghost's, and I start shivering in its icy clutch.'

'Do you recall that ancient slaughter at Sekala Crossing? Did your visions echo those, Corporal?'

List frowned, then shook his head. 'No, what lies ahead of us now is much older, Historian.'

Shouts arose as the train readied to lurch into motion again, down off the Imperial Road and onto the trader track.

Duiker looked out over the studded plain to the south. 'I will walk alongside your travois, Corporal,' he said, 'while you describe for me in detail these visions of yours.'

'They might be naught but fevered delusions, Historian—'

'But you don't believe so . . . and neither do I.' His eyes remained on the plain. A *many-jointed hand. Not a god's hand, Corporal, though one of such power that you might well have thought so. You've been chosen, lad, for whatever reason, to witness an Elder vision. Out from the darkness comes the cold hand of a Jaghut.*

Felisin sat on a block of masonry that had fallen from the ancient gate, her arms wrapped around herself, her eyes on the ground before her, steadily rocking in a slow cadence. The motion brought peace to her mind, as if she was nothing more than a vessel filled with water.

Heboric and the giant warrior were arguing. About her, about prophecies and ill chance, about the desperation of fanatics. Mutual contempt swirled and bubbled between the two men, seemingly born in the instant they met, and growing darker with every moment that passed.

The other warrior, Leoman, crouched nearby, matching her silence. He had before him the Holy Book of Dryjhna, guarding the tome in her stead, awaiting what he seemed to see as her inevitable acceptance that she was indeed Sha'ik reborn.

Reborn. Renewed. Heart of the Apocalypse. Delivered by the unhanded in the suspended breath of the goddess. Who waits still. Waits as Leoman waits. Felisin, hinge of the world.

A smile cracked her features.

She rocked to distant cries, the ancient echoes of sudden, soul-jarring deaths – they seemed so far away now. Kulp, devoured beneath a seething mound of rats. Gnawed bones and a shock of white hair streaked red. Baudin, burned in a fire of his own making – *oh, the irony of that, he lived by his own rule and died with that same godless claim. Even as he gave up his life for someone else. Still, he'd say he made his vow freely.*

These are the things that bring stillness.

Deaths that had already withdrawn, far down the endless, dusty track, too distant to make their demands heard or felt. *Grief rapes the mind, and I know all about rape. It's a question of acquiescence. So I shall feel nothing. No rape, no grief.*

Stones grated beside her. Heboric. She knew the feeling of his presence and had no need to look up. The one-time priest of Fener was muttering under his breath. Then he fell silent, as if steeling himself to reach into her silence. *Rape. A* moment later he spoke, 'They want to get moving, lass. They're both far gone. The oasis – Sha'ik's encampment – is a long walk. There's water to be found on the way, but little in the way of food. The Toblakai will hunt, but game's gone very scarce – the Soletaken and D'ivers, I gather. In any case, whether you open the Book or not, we have to move.'

She said nothing, continued rocking.

Heboric cleared his throat. 'For all I rage against their mad, fevered notions, and counsel most strongly against your accepting them ... we need these two, and the oasis. They know Raraku – better than anyone else. If we're to have any chance of surviving . ..'

Surviving.

'I'll grant you,' Heboric went on after a moment, 'I've acquired ... senses ... that make my blindness less of a liability. And these hands of mine, reborn... Nonetheless, Felisin, I'm not enough to guard you. And besides, there is no guarantee that these two will let us walk away from them, if you understand my meaning.'

Surviving.

'Wake up, lass! You've got some decisions to make.'

'Sha'ik drew her blade against the Empire,' she said, eyes still on the dusty ground.

'A foolish gesture—'

'Sha'ik would face the Empress, would send the Imperial armies into a blood-filled Abyss.'

'History recounts similar rebellions, lass, and the tale is an endless echo. Glorious ideals lend a vigour of health to Hood's bleached grin, but it's naught but a glamour, and righteousness—'

'Who cares about what's righteous, old man? The Empress must needs answer Sha'ik's challenge.'

'Aye.'

'And shall despatch an army from Quon Tali.'

'Likely already on the way.'

'And,' Felisin continued, feeling a cold breath touch her flesh, 'who commands this army?'

She heard him draw a sharp breath of his own and felt him flinch back.

'Lass—'

She snapped out a hand as if batting away a wasp, and rose to her feet. She turned to find Leoman staring at her, his sun-scoured face striking her suddenly as Raraku's own. *Harder than Beneth's, without any of the affectations. Sharper than Baudin, oh, there's wit there, in those cold, dark eyes.* 'To Sha'ik's encampment,' she said.

He glanced down at the Book, then back to her.

Felisin raised an eyebrow. 'Would you rather walk through a storm? Let the goddess wait a little longer before renewing her fury, Leoman.'

She saw him reappraise her, a glimmer of uncertainty newly arriving in his eyes, and was pleased. After a moment, he bowed his head.

'Felisin,' Heboric hissed, 'have you any idea—'

'Better than you, old man. Now keep quiet.'

'Perhaps we should part ways now—'

She swung to him. 'No. I think I shall have need for you, Heboric'

He gave her a bitter smile. 'As your conscience, lass? I'm a poor choice.'

Yes, you are, and all the better for that.

The ancient path showed signs of having once been a road, running the length of a ridge that twisted like a crooked spine towards a distant mesa. Cobbles showed like bone where the wind had scoured away the sandy soil. The path was littered with red-glazed potsherds that crunched underfoot.

The Toblakai scouted five hundred paces ahead, unseen in the ochre haze, while Leoman led Felisin and Heboric at a measured pace, rarely speaking. The man was frighteningly gaunt and moved so silently over the ground that Felisin had begun to imagine him no more than a spectre. Nor did Heboric stumble in his blindness as he walked behind her.

Glancing back, she saw him smiling. 'Something amusing you?'

'This road is crowded, lass.'

'The same ghosts as in the buried city?'

He shook his head. 'Not as old. These are memories of an age that followed the First Empire.'

Leoman stopped and turned at that.

Heboric's broad mouth extended into a grin. 'Oh aye, Raraku is showing me her secrets.'

'Why?'

The ex-priest shrugged.

Felisin eyed the desert warrior. 'Does that make you nervous, Leoman?'
Because it should.

He glanced at her, his eyes dark and appraising. 'What is this man to you?'

I don't know. 'My companion. My historian. Of great value since I am to make Raraku my home.'

'The Holy Desert's secrets are not his to possess. He plunders them as would any foreign raider. If you desire Raraku's truths, look within

yourself.'

She almost gave a laugh at that, but knew its bitterness would frighten even her.

They continued on, the morning's heat rising, the sky turning into gold fire. The ridge narrowed, revealing the ancient road's foundation stones, ten or more feet down on either side, the slope beyond falling away a further fifty or sixty feet. The Toblakai awaited them at a place where the road bed had collapsed to create large, dark holes in the ground. From one of them issued the soft trickle of water.

'An aqueduct beneath the road,' Heboric said. 'It used to flow in a torrent.'

Felisin saw the Toblakai scowl.

Leoman gathered the waterskins and proceeded to crawl down into the hole.

Heboric sat down to rest. After a moment, he cocked his head. 'Sorry you had to wait for us, Toblakai-with-the-secret-name, though I imagine you'd have trouble getting your head through that cave mouth in any case.'

The giant savage sneered, revealing filed teeth. 'I collect tokens of the people I kill. Tied here on my belt. One day I will have yours.'

'He means your ears, Heboric,' Felisin said.

'Oh, I know, lass,' the ex-priest said. 'Tortured spirits writhe in this bastard's shadow – every man, woman and child that he's killed. Tell me, Toblakai, did those children beg to live? Did they weep, cry out for their mothers?'

'No more than grown men did,' the giant said, yet Felisin saw that he had paled, though she sensed that it was not his killing of children that bothered him. No, there was something else in what Heboric had said.

Tortured spirits. He's haunted by the ghosts of those he's slain. Forgive me, Toblakai, if I spare you no pity.

'This land is not home to Toblakai,' Heboric said. 'Has the Rebellion's lure of slaughter called you here? From where did you crawl, bastard?'

'I have said to you all that I shall say. When I speak to you next it will be when I kill you.'

Leoman emerged from the hole, cobwebs snagged in his bound hair, the waterskins bulging at his back. 'You will kill no-one until I say so,' he growled to the Toblakai, then swung a glare on Heboric. 'And I've not yet said so.'

There was something in the giant's expression that spoke of immense patience coupled with unwavering certainty. He rose to his full height, accepted a waterskin from Leoman, then set off down the trail.

Heboric stared sightlessly after him. 'The wood of that weapon is soaked in pain. I cannot imagine he sleeps well at night.'

'He barely sleeps at all,' Leoman muttered. 'You shall cease baiting him.'

The ex-priest grimaced. 'You've not seen the ghosts of children tied to his heels, Leoman. But I shall make the effort to keep my mouth shut.'

'His tribe made few distinctions,' Leoman said. 'There was kin, and those who were not kin were the enemy. Now, enough talk.'

A hundred paces on, the road suddenly widened, opening out onto the flat of the mesa. To either side ran row upon row of oblong humps of fired, reddish clay, each hump seven feet long and three wide. Despite the foreshortened horizons created by the suspended dust, Felisin could see that the rows, scores deep, encircled the entire plateau – entirely surrounding the ruined city that lay before them.

The cobbles were fully exposed now, revealing a broad causeway that ran in a straight line towards what had once been a grand gate, worn down by centuries of wind to knee-high stumps of bleached stone – as was the entire city beyond.

'A slow death,' Heboric whispered.

The Toblakai was already striding through the distant gates.

'We must cross through to the other side, down to the harbour,' Leoman said. 'Where we shall find a hidden camp. And a cache ... unless it has been pillaged.'

The city's main street was a dusty mosaic of shattered pottery: red-glazed body sherds, grey, black and brown rims. 'I will think of this,' Felisin said, 'when I next carelessly break a pot.'

Heboric grunted. 'I know of scholars who claim they can map entire extinct cultures through the study of such detritus.'

'Now there's a lifetime of excitement,' Felisin drawled.

'Would that I could trade places with one of them!'

'You are not serious, Heboric'

'I am not? Fener's tusk, lass, I am not the adventurous type—'

'Perhaps not at first, but then you were broken. Shattered. Like these pots here.'

'I appreciate the observation, Felisin.'

'You cannot be remade unless you are first broken.'

'You have become very philosophic in your advanced years, I see.'

More *than you realize.* 'Tell me you've learned no truths, Heboric'

He snorted. 'Aye, I've learned one. There are no truths. You'll understand that yourself, years from now, when Hood's shadow stretches your way.'

'There are truths,' Leoman said ahead of them, not turning as he continued. 'Raraku. Dryjhna. The Whirlwind and the Apocalypse. The weapon in the hand, the flow of blood.'

'You've not made our journey, Leoman,' Heboric growled.

'Your journey was rebirth – as she has said – and so there was pain. Only fools would expect otherwise.'

The old man made no reply to that.

They walked on in the city's sepulchral silence. The foundation stones and the low ridges of inner walls mapped the floor plans of the buildings to either side. A precise geometric plan was evident in the layout of streets and alleys, a half-circle of concentric rings, with the flat side the harbour itself. The remains of a large, palatial structure were visible ahead; the massive stones at the centre had been more successful in withstanding the centuries of erosion.

Felisin glanced back at Heboric. 'Still plagued by ghosts?'

'Not plagued, lass. There was no great unleashing of brutality here. Only sadness, and even that was naught but a subcurrent. Cities die. Cities mimic the cycle of every living thing: birth, vigorous youth, maturity, old age, then finally . .. dust and potsherds. In the last century of this place, the sea was already receding, even as a new influence arrived, something foreign. There was a brief renaissance – we'll see evidence of that ahead, at the harbour – but it was short-lived.' He was silent for a dozen or so paces. 'You know, Felisin, I begin to understand something of the lives of the Ascendants. To live for hundreds, then thousands of years. To witness this flowering in all its futile glory, ah, is it any wonder that their hearts grow hard and cold?'

'This journey has brought you closer to your god, Heboric.'

The comment stung him to silence.

She saw what Heboric had hinted at when they reached the city's harbour. What had once been the bay had silted in, yet four cyclopean channels had been constructed, reaching out to vanish in the haze. Each was as wide as three city streets and almost as deep.

'The last ships sailed out from these canals,' Heboric said at her side. 'The heaviest transports scraped bottom at the far mouths, and could only make way with the tide at peak. A few thousand denizens remained, until the aqueducts dried up. This is one story of Raraku, but alas, not the only one, and the others were far more violent, far more bloody. Yet I wonder, which was the more tragic?'

'You waste your thoughts on the past—' Leoman began, but was interrupted by a shout from the Toblakai. The giant had appeared near one

of the canal heads. Falling silent, the desert warrior set off towards his companion.

As Felisin moved to follow, Heboric grasped her arm, the unseen hand a cool, tingling contact. He waited until Leoman was beyond earshot, then said, 'I have fears, lass—'

'I'm not surprised,' she cut in. 'That Toblakai means to kill you.'

'Not that fool. I mean Leoman.'

'He was Sha'ik's bodyguard. If I am to become her I'll not need to mistrust his loyalty, Heboric. My only concern is that he and the Toblakai did such a poor job of protecting Sha'ik the first time around.'

'Leoman is no fanatic,' the ex-priest said. 'Oh, he might well make appropriate noises to lead you to believe otherwise, but there is an ambivalence in him. I don't for a moment believe he thinks you are truly Sha'ik reborn. The simple fact is the rebellion needs a figurehead – a young, strong one, not the worn-down old woman that the original Sha'ik must have been. Hood's breath, she was a force in this desert twenty-five years ago. You might want to consider the possibility that these two bodyguards didn't break a sweat in their efforts to defend her.'

She looked at him. The tattoos made an almost solid whirling pattern on his weathered, toadlike face. His eyes were red and rimmed in dried mucus and a thin, grey patina dulled his pupils. 'Then I can also assume they will have greater cause this time around.'

'Provided you play their game. Leoman's game, to be more precise. He will be the one to speak for you to the army at the encampment – if he has cause he will hint at doubts, and they will tear you apart—'

'I have no fear of Leoman,' Felisin said. 'I understand men like him, Heboric.'

His lips closed to a thin line.

She drew her arm away from that unnatural grip and began walking.

'Beneth was less than a child to this Leoman,' the ex-priest hissed behind her. 'He was a thug, a bully, a tyrant to a handful of the downtrodden. Any man can preen with great ambitions, no matter how pathetic his station, Felisin. You are doing worse than clinging to the memory of Beneth – you are clinging to the airs he projected, and they were naught but delusions—'

She whirled. 'You know nothing!' she hissed, trembling with fury. 'You think I fear what a man can do? Any man? You think you know me? That you can know my thoughts, know what I feel? You presumptuous bastard, Heboric—'

His laughter struck her like a blow, shocking her into silence. 'Dear lass,' he said. 'You would keep me at your side. As what? An ornament? A macabre curiosity? Would you burn out my tongue to balance my blindness? I am here to keep you amused, then, even as you accuse me of presumption. Oh, that is sweet indeed—'

'Stop talking, Heboric,' Felisin said quietly, suddenly weary. 'If one day we do come to understand each other, it will be without words. Who needs swords when we have our tongues, you and I? Let us sheathe them and have done with it.'

He cocked his head. 'One last question, then. Why would you have me stay, Felisin?'

She hesitated before answering him, wondering at how he would take this particular truth. Well, *that is something. Not long ago I would not have cared.* 'Because it means survival, Heboric. I offer ... for Baudin.'

Head still cocked, the ex-priest slowly wiped one forearm across his dusty brow. 'Perhaps,' he said, 'we'll yet come to understand each other.'

The canal mouth was marked by a broad series of stone steps, over a hundred in all. At the base, on what had once been the seabed, a more recent stone wall had been constructed, providing attachment points for a canvas shelter. A ring of stones surrounded an ash-stained firepit nearby,

and the old cobbles that had once covered the cache were now tumbled about, a gutted cairn.

The subject of the Toblakai's outcry were the seven half-eaten corpses scattered about the camp, each a mass of flies. The blood in the fine, white sand was only a few hours old, still gummy to the touch. The stench of loosened bowels soured the hazy air.

Leoman crouched by the stairs, studying the bestial prints that marked a bloodstained ascent back up into the city. After a long moment, he glanced over at the Toblakai. 'If you want this one, you'll go on your own,' he said.

The giant bared his teeth. 'I will have no-one else crowding me,' he replied, unslinging his waterskin and bedroll and letting them drop to the ground. He unsheathed his wooden sword, holding it as if it was no more than a twig.

Heboric snorted from where he leaned against the stone wall. 'You plan to hunt down this Soletaken? I take it that in your tribe you are nearing the end of the average expected lifespan, assuming your kin are as stupid as you. Well, I for one will not grieve your death.'

The Toblakai maintained his vow, refusing to address Heboric, though his grin broadened. He swung to Leoman. 'I am Raraku's vengeance against such intruders.'

'If you are, then avenge my kin,' the desert warrior replied.

The Toblakai set off, taking the steps three at a time and not slowing until he reached the top, where he paused to study tracks. A moment later he slipped beyond their line of sight.

'The Soletaken will kill him,' Heboric said.

Leoman shrugged. 'Perhaps. Sha'ik saw far into his future, however...'

'And what did she see?' Felisin asked.

'She would not say. Yet it... appalled her.'

'The Seer of the Apocalypse was *appalled?'* Felisin looked at Heboric. The ex-priest's expression was drawn taut, as if he'd just heard confirmation of some glimmer of the future he had himself sensed. 'Tell me, Leoman,' she said, 'of her other visions.'

The man had begun dragging the bodies of his kin to one side. He paused at her question, glanced over. 'When you open the Holy Book, they shall be visited upon you. This is Dryjhna's gift... among others.'

'You expect me to go through with this ritual before we reach the encampment.'

'You must. The ritual is the proof that you are truly Sha'ik reborn.'

Heboric grunted. 'And what does that mean, precisely?'

'If she is false, the ritual shall destroy her.'

The ancient island rose in a flat-topped hump above the cracked clay plain. Grey, weathered stumps marked mooring poles and more substantial piers just beyond what had once been the shoreline, along with remnants of the usual garbage that had once been dumped over the sides of ships. Sinkholes in what had been the bay's muddy bottom glittered with compacted layers of glittering fish-scale.

Crouching beside Fiddler, Mappo watched as Icarium made his way up the crumbled remains of a sea wall. Crokus stood just behind the Trell, near the hobbled horses. The lad had fallen strangely silent since their last meal stop, a certain economy coming to his movements, as if he had chained himself to his own vow of patience. And seemingly unconsciously, the Daru had begun to emulate Icarium in his speech and mannerisms. Mappo was neither amused nor displeased when he noticed. The Jhag had always been an overwhelming presence, all the more so because he made no affectation or pretence.

Still, better for Crokus had he looked to Fiddler. This soldier's a wonder in his own right.

'Icarium climbs like he knows where he's going,' the sapper observed.

Mappo winced. 'I had come to the same observation,' he ruefully admitted.

'Have you two been here before?'

'I have not, Fiddler. But Icarium ... well, he's wandered this land before.'

'But in returning to a place he'd been to before, how would he know?'

The Trell shook his head. *He shouldn't. He never has before. Are those blessed barriers breaking down? Queen of Dreams, return Icarium to the bliss of not knowing. I beg you . . .*

'Let us join him,' Fiddler said, slowly straightening.

'I'd rather—'

'As you wish,' the soldier replied, setting off after the Jhag, who had vanished into the thorn-choked city ruins beyond the sea wall. After a moment, Crokus strode past Mappo as well.

The Trell grimaced. I must *be getting old, to let being distraught cow me so.* He sighed, rising from his crouch and lumbering after the others.

The slope of detritus at the base of the sea wall was a treacherous scree of splintered wood, slabs of plaster, brick and potsherds. Halfway up, Fiddler grunted and paused, reaching down to pull free a shaft of grey wood. 'I've some rethinking to do,' he said, glancing back down. 'All this wood's turned to stone.'

'Petrified,' Crokus said. 'My uncle described the process to me once. The wood soaks up minerals. But that's supposed to take tens of thousands of years.'

'Well, a High Mage of the D'riss Warren could manage the same in the blink of an eye, lad.'

Mappo pulled free a fragment of pottery. Not much thicker than an eggshell, the shard was sky blue in colour and very hard. It revealed the

torso of a figure painted on the surface, black with a green outline. The image was stiff, stylized, but without doubt human. He let the sherd drop.

'This city was dead long before the sea dried up,' Fiddler said, resuming his climb.

Crokus called up after him, 'How do you know?'

'Because everything's water-worn, lad. Waves crumbled this sea wall. Century after century of waves. I grew up in a port city, remember. I've seen what water can do. The Emperor had Malaz Bay dredged before the Imperial piers were built – revealed old sea walls and the like.' Reaching the top, he paused to catch his breath. 'Showed everyone that Malaz City's older than anybody'd realized.'

'And that the sea levels have risen since,' Mappo observed.

'Aye.'

At the top of the sea wall the city stretched out before them. While the remains were weathered, it was clear that the city had been deliberately destroyed. Every building had been reduced to rubble, revealing a cataclysmic use of force and fury. Scrub brush filled every open space that remained and low, gnarled trees clung to foundation stones and surmounted the mounds of wreckage.

Statuary had been a primary feature of the architecture, lining the broad colonnades and set in niches on every building wall. Marble body parts lay everywhere, each displaying the rigid style that Mappo had seen on the potsherd. The Trell began to sense a familiarity with the assortment of human figures portrayed.

A legend, told on the Jhag Odhan ... a *tale told by the elders in my tribe . . .*

Icarium was nowhere to be seen.

'Now where?' Fiddler asked.

A frail keening rising in his head, bringing sweat to his dark skin, Mappo stepped forward.

'Caught a scent of something, have you?'

He barely heard the sapper's question.

The city's pattern was hard to distinguish from what remained, yet Mappo followed his own mental map, born of his memory of the legend, its cadence, its precise metering when recounted in the harsh, clashing dialect of archaic Trell. People who possessed no written language carried the use of speech to astonishing extremes. Words were numbers were codes were formulae. Words held secret maps, the measuring of paces, the patterns of mortal minds, of histories, of cities, of continents and warrens.

The tribe Mappo had adopted all those centuries ago had chosen to return to the old ways, rejecting the changes that were afflicting the Trell. The elders had shown Mappo and the others all that was in danger of being lost, the power that resided in the telling of tales, the ritual unscrolling of memory.

Mappo knew where Icarium had gone. He knew what the Jhag would find. His heart thundering savagely in his chest, his pace increased as he scrambled over the rubble, pushing through thickets of thorn which lacerated even his tough hide.

Seven main avenues within each city of the First Empire. The Sky Spirits look down upon the holy number, seven scorpion tails, seven stings facing the circle of sand. To *all who would make offerings to the Seven Holies, look to the circle of sand.*

Fiddler called out somewhere behind him, but the Trell did not respond. He'd found one of the curving avenues and was making for the centre.

The seven scorpion-sting thrones had once towered over the enclosure, each seventy-seven arm-spans high. Each had been shattered ... *by sword blows, by an unbreakable weapon in hands powered by a rage almost impossible to comprehend.*

Little remained of the offerings and tributes that had once crowded the circle of sand, with one exception, before which Icarium now stood. The

Jhag was motionless, his head tilted upwards to take in the immense construction that rose before him.

Its iron gears showed no rust, no corrosion, and would still be moving in a measure that could not be seen by mortal eyes. The enormous disc that dominated the structure stood at an angle, its marble face smothered with etched symbols. It faced the sun, though that fiery orb was barely visible through the sky's golden haze.

Mappo slowly walked towards Icarium and stopped two paces behind him.

His presence was sensed, for Icarium spoke. 'How can this be, friend?'

It was the voice of a lost child, and it twisted like a barbed shaft in the Trell's heart.

'This is mine, you see,' the Jhag continued. 'My ... *gift.* Or so I can read, in this ancient Omtose script. More, I have marked – with knowing – its season, its year of construction. And see how the disc has turned, so that I may see the Omtose correspondence for this year ... allowing me to calculate ...'

His voice fell away.

Mappo hugged himself, unable to speak, unable even to think. Anguish and fear filled him until he too felt like a child, come face to face with a nightmare.

'Tell me, Mappo,' Icarium continued after a long moment, 'why did the destroyers of this city not destroy this as well? True, sorcery invested it, made it immune to time's own ravages ... but so too were these seven thrones ... so too were many other gifts in this circle. All things made can be broken, after all. Why, Mappo?'

The Trell prayed his friend would not turn around, would not reveal his face, his eyes. *The child's worst fears, the nightmare's face – a mother, a father, all love stripped away, replaced by cold intent, or blind disregard, the simple lack of caring . . . and so the child wakens shrieking . . .*

Do not turn, *Icarium, I cannot bear to see your face.*

'Perhaps I made an error,' Icarium said, still in that quiet, innocent tone. Mappo heard Fiddler and Crokus arrive on the sand behind him. Something in the air held them to silence, stalled their approach. 'A mistake in the measurement, a slip of the script. It's an old language, Omtose, faint in my memory – perhaps as faint back then, when I first built this. The knowledge I seem to retain feels ... precise, yet I am not perfect, am I? My certainty could be a self-delusion.'

No, Icarium, you are not perfect.

'I calculate that ninety-four thousand years have passed since I last stood here, Mappo. Ninety-four thousand. There must be some error in that. No city ruin could survive that long, could it?'

Mappo found himself shrugging. *How could we know one way or the other?*

'The investiture of sorcery, perhaps...'

Perhaps.

'Who destroyed this city, I wonder?'

You did, Icarium, yet even in your rage a part of you recognized what you yourself had built, and left it intact.

'They had great power, whoever they were,' the Jhag continued. 'T'lan Imass arrived here, sought to drive the enemy back – an old alliance between the denizens of this city and the Silent Host. Their shattered bones lie buried in the sand beneath us. In their thousands. What force was there that could do such a thing, Mappo? Not Jaghut, even in their preeminence a thousand millennia past. And the K'Chain Che'Malle have been extinct for even longer. I do not understand this, friend ...'

A callused hand fell on Mappo's shoulder, offered a solid grip briefly, then withdrew as Fiddler stepped past the Trell.

'The answer seems clear enough to me, Icarium,' the soldier said, halting at the Jhag's side. 'An Ascendant power. The fury of a god or goddess

unleashed this devastation. How many tales have you heard of ancient empires reaching too high in their pride? Who were the Seven Holies to begin with? Whoever they were, they were honoured here, in this city and no doubt its sister cities throughout Raraku. Seven thrones, look at the rage that assailed each of them. Looks ... personal, to me. A god's or a goddess's hand slapped down here, Icarium – but whoever it was has since drifted away from mortal minds, for I, at least, cannot think of any known Ascendant able to unleash such power on the mortal plain as we see here—'

'Oh, they could,' Icarium said, a hint of renewed vigour in his voice, 'but they have since learned the greater value of subtlety when interfering in the activities of mortals – the old way was too dangerous in every respect. I suspect you have answered my question, Fiddler...'

The sapper shrugged.

Mappo found his heart slowing. *Just do not again think of* that *lone, surviving artefact, Icarium.* Sweat dripping in an uneven patter on the sand, he shivered, drew a deep breath. He glanced back at Crokus. The lad's attention was elsewhere in such a studied pose of casual indifference that the Trell was left wondering at his state of mind.

'Ninety-four thousand years – that must be an error,' Icarium said. He turned from the structure, offering the Trell a weak smile.

The scene blurred in Mappo's eyes. He nodded and looked away to fight back a renewed surge of sorrow.

'Well,' Fiddler said, 'shall we resume our pursuit of Apsalar and her father?'

Icarium shook himself, then murmured, 'Aye. We are close ... to many things, it seems.'

A perilous journey indeed.

The night of his leavetaking all those centuries ago, in the hours when the last of his old loyalties was ritually shriven from him, Mappo had knelt

before the tribe's eldest shoulder-woman in the smoky confines of her yurt. 'I must know more,' he'd whispered. 'More of these Nameless Ones, who would so demand this of me. Are they sworn to a god?'

'Once, but no more,' the old woman had replied, unable or unwilling to meet his eye. 'Cast out, cast down. In the time of the First Empire which was not, in truth, the first – for the T'lan Imass claimed that title long before. They were the left hand, another sect the right hand – both guiding, meant to be clasped. Instead, those who would come to be Unnamed, in their journeys into mysteries—' She chopped with one hand, a gesture Mappo had not seen before among the tribe's elders. A gesture, he realized with a start, of a Jhag. 'Mysteries of another led them astray. They bowed to a new master. That is all there is to say.'

'Who was this new master?'

The woman shook her head, turned away.

'Whose power resides in those staves they carry?'

She would not answer.

In the passage of time, Mappo believed he had found the answer to that question, but it was a knowledge devoid of comfort.

They left the ancient island behind and struck out across the clay plain as the day's light slowly faded from the sky. The horses were suffering, needing water that even Icarium and Mappo's desert craft could not find. The Trell had no idea how Apsalar and her father fared, yet they'd managed to stay ahead, day after day.

This trail and its goal has naught to do with Sha'ik. We have been led far from the places of such activity, far from where Sha'ik was killed, far from the oasis. Fiddler knows our destination. He has divined the knowledge from whatever secrets he holds within him. Indeed, we all suspect, though we speak nothing of it – perhaps Crokus alone remains ignorant, but I may well be underestimating the young man. He's grown within himself. . .

Mappo glanced across to Fiddler. We *go to the place you sought all along, soldier.*

Dusk closed in on the barren landscape, but enough light remained to reveal a chilling convergence of tracks. Soletaken and D'ivers by the score, the number frightening to contemplate, closing to join the twin footsteps of Apsalar and her father.

Crokus fell back a dozen paces as they walked their horses. Mappo took little note of the detail until, a short while later, he whirled at a shout from the Daru. Crokus was on the ground, grappling with a man in the dusty gloom. Shadows flitted across the cracked clay. The lad managed to pin the man down, gripping his wrists.

'I knew you were lurking about, you weasel!' Crokus snarled. 'For hours and hours, since before the island! All I had to do was wait and now I've got you!'

The others backtracked to where Crokus straddled Iskaral Pust. The High Priest had ceased his writhing efforts to escape. 'Another thousand paces!' he hissed. 'And the deceit is complete! Have you seen the signs of my glorious success? Any of you? Are you all dimwits? Oh, so unkind in my nefarious thoughts! But see me respond to their accusations with manly silence, hah!'

'You might let him up,' Icarium said to Crokus. 'He'll not run now.'

'Let him up? How about stringing him up?'

'The next tree we come to, lad,' Fiddler said, grinning, 'and that's a promise.'

The Daru released the High Priest. Iskaral scrambled to his feet, crouching like a rat deciding which way to dart. 'Deadly proliferation! Do I dare accompany them? Do I risk the glory of witnessing with my own eyes the fullest yield of my brilliant efforts? Well disguised, this uncertainty, they know nothing!'

'You're coming with us,' Crokus growled, hands on the two daggers jutting from his belt. 'No matter what happens.'

'Why, of course, lad!' Iskaral spun to face the Daru, his head bobbing. 'I was but hastening to catch up!' He ducked his head. 'He believes me, I can see it in his face. The soft-brained dolt! Who is a match for Iskaral Pust? No-one! I must remain quietly triumphant, so very quietly. The key to understanding lies in the unknown nature of warrens. Can they be torn into fragments? Oh yes, oh, yes indeed. And that is the secret of Raraku! They wander more than one world, all unknowing ... and before us, ah, the slumbering giant that is the heart! The true heart, not Sha'ik's grubby oasis, oh, such fools abound!' He paused, looked up at the others. 'Why do you stare so? We should be walking. A thousand paces, no more, to your heart's desire, hee hee!' He broke into a dance, knees jerking high as he jumped in place.

'Oh, for Hood's sake!' Crokus grasped the High Priest's collar, flung him stumbling forward. 'Let's go.'

'The cajoling good-humoured jostling of youth,' Iskaral murmured. 'Such warm comradely gestures, oh, I am softened, am I not?'

Mappo glanced at Icarium and found the Jhag staring at him. Their gazes locked. A *fragmented warren. What on earth has happened to this land?* The question was shared in silence, though in the Trell's mind a further thought ensued. *The* legends *claim that Icarium emerged from this place, strode out from Raraku. A warren torn to pieces – Raraku changes all who stride its broken soil – gods, have we indeed come to the place where Icarium's living nightmare was born?*

They continued on. Overhead, the sky's faded bronze deepened to impenetrable black, a starless void that seemed to be slowly sinking, lowering itself around them. Iskaral Pust's muttering dwindled as if swallowed up by the night. Mappo could see that both Fiddler and Crokus were having difficulty, though both continued walking, hands held out like blind men.

A dozen strides in front of the others, Icarium halted, turned.

Mappo tilted his head, acknowledging that he too had spied the two figures standing fifty paces further on. Apsalar and Servant – *the only name*

by which I know that old man, a simple but ominous title.

The Jhag strode over to take one of Crokus's outstretched hands. 'We have found them,' he said in a low tone that nevertheless carried, bringing everyone to a stop. 'They await us, it seems,' Icarium continued, 'before a threshold.'

'Threshold?' Fiddler snapped. 'Quick Ben never mentioned anything like that. Threshold to what?'

'A knotted, torn piece of warren!' Iskaral Pust hissed. 'Oh, see how the Path of Hands has led into it – the fools followed, one and all! The High Priest of Shadow was tasked to set a false trail, and look, oh, look how he has done so!'

Crokus turned to the sound of Iskaral Pust's voice. 'But why did her father lead us here? So that we may all be set upon and slaughtered by a horde of Soletaken and D'ivers?'

'Servant journeys home, you withered mole carcass!' The High Priest danced in place again. 'If the convergence does not kill him first, of course! Hee hee! And takes her, and the sapper, too – and you, lad. You! Ask the Jhag what waits within the warren! Waits like a clenched hand holding down this fragment of realm!'

Apsalar and her father approached side by side.

Mappo had wondered at this reunion, but no expectations he'd envisioned would match the reality. Crokus had yet to notice them, and was instead drawing his daggers and preparing to close in on the sound of the High Priest's voice. Icarium stood behind the Daru, a moment from disarming him. The scene was almost comic, for Crokus could see nothing, and Iskaral Pust began throwing his voice so that it emerged from a dozen places at once, while he continued his capering dance.

Fiddler, cursing under his breath, had removed a battered lantern from his pack and was now hunting for a flint.

'Do you dare tread the path?' Iskaral Pust sang out. 'Do you dare? Do you dare?'

Apsalar halted before Mappo. 'I knew you would win through,' she said. She swung her head. 'Crokus! I am here—'

He whirled, sheathed his daggers and closed.

Sparks flashed and bounced from where Fiddler crouched.

The Trell watched as the Daru's reaching arms were captured by Apsalar and guided around her in a tight embrace. *Oh, lad, you do not know how poignant your blindness is . . .*

An aura that was an echo of a god clung to her, yet it had become wholly her own. The Trell's sense of it did not leave him at ease.

Icarium came close to Mappo. Tremorlor,' he said.

'Aye.'

'There are some who claim the Azath are in truth benign, a force to keep power in check, that they arise where and when there is need. My friend, I am beginning to see much truth in those claims.'

The Trell nodded. This torn *warren possesses such pain. If it could wander, drift, it would deliver horror and chaos. Tremorlor holds it here – Iskaral Pust speaks the truth – but even so, how Raraku has twisted on all sides . . .*

'I sense Soletaken and D'ivers within,' Icarium said. 'Closing, seeking to find the House—'

'Believing it to be a gate.'

The lantern glowed into light, a lurid yellow that reached no more than a few paces in any direction. Fiddler rose from his crouch, eyes on Mappo. 'There *is* a gate there, just not the one the shapeshifters seek. Nor will they get to it – the grounds of the Azath will take them.'

'As it might all of us,' spoke a new voice.

They turned to see Apsalar's father standing nearby. 'Now,' he grated, 'I'd be obliged if you could bend your efforts into talkin' my daughter out of going any farther – we can't try the gate, 'cause it's inside the House ...'

'Yet you led her here,' Fiddler said. 'Granted, we were looking for Tremorlor in any case, but whatever reasons you have are Iskaral Pust's, aren't they?'

Mappo spoke, 'Do you have a name, Servant?'

The old man grimaced. 'Rellock.' Glancing back to Fiddler, he shook his head. 'I can't guess the High Priest's motives. I only did what I was told. A final task for the High Priest, one to clear the debt and I always clears my debt, even to gods.'

'They gave you back the arm you'd lost,' the sapper said.

'And spared me and the life of my daughter, the day the Hounds came. No-one else survived, you know ...'

Fiddler grunted. 'It was *their* Hounds, Rellock.'

'Even so, even so. It's the false trail, you see, the one that leads the shapeshifters astray, leads them—'

'Away from the true gate,' Icarium said, nodding. 'The one beneath Pust's temple.'

Rellock nodded. 'We had to finish the false trail, is all, me and my daughter. Plantin' signs, leaving trails and the like. Now that's done. We hid in shadow while the shapeshifters rushed in. If I'm fated to die in bed in my village in Itko Kan, then it don't matter how long's the walk.'

'Rellock wants to go back to fishing, hee hee!' Iskaral Pust sang. 'But the place you left is not what you return to, oh no. From one day to the next, never mind years. Rellock's done work guided by the hands of gods, yet he dreams of dragging nets, with the sun on his face and lines between his toes! He is the heart of the Empire – Laseen should take note! Take note!'

Fiddler returned to his horse, drew out the crossbow and set the crank, then locked it. 'The rest of you can choose as you like; I've got to go in.' He paused, glancing back at the horses. 'And we should let the beasts go.' He walked over to his mount and began loosening the girth straps. He sighed,

patting the Gral gelding on the neck. 'You've done me proud, but you'll do better out here – lead the others, friend, to Sha'ik's camp ...'

After a moment, the others strode to their own mounts.

Icarium turned to the Trell. 'I too must go.'

Mappo closed his eyes, willing a stillness to his inner turmoil. *Gods, I am a coward.* In all *ways* imaginable, a *coward.*

'Friend?'

The Trell nodded.

'Oh, you will all go!' the High Priest of Shadow crooned, still dancing. 'Seeking answers and yet more answers! But in my silent thoughts I snigger and warn you all with words that you will not hear – *beware sleight of hand. Compared to the Azath, my immortal lords are but fumbling children!*'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tremorlor, the Throne of Sand
is said to lie within Raraku.
A House of the Azath, it
stands alone on uprooted soil
where all tracks are ghosts
and every ghost leads to
Tremorlor's door.

Patterns in the Azath
The Nameless Ones

For as far as Duiker could see, stretching west and east, the cedar forest was filled with butterflies. The dusty green of the trees was barely visible through a restless canopy of pale yellow. Along Vathar's gutted verge, bracken rose amidst skeletal branches, forming a solid barrier but for the trader track that carved its way towards the river.

The historian had ridden out from the column and halted his horse on a low hilltop that rose from the studded plain. The Chain of Dogs was stretched, exhaustion straining its links. Dust rode the air above it like a ghostly cape, grasped by the wind and pulled northward.

Duiker drew his eyes from the distant scenes and scanned the hilltop beneath him. Large, angular boulders had been placed in roughly concentric rings: the summit's crown. He had seen such formations before, but could not recall where. A pervasive unease hung in the air over the hilltop.

A rider approached at a trot from the train, showing obvious discomfort with each rise in the stirrups. Duiker scowled. Corporal List was anything but hale. The young man was risking a permanent limp with all this premature activity, but there was no swaying him.

'Historian,' List said as he reined in.

'Corporal, you're a fool.'

'Yes, sir. Word's come from the rearguard's western flank. Korbolo Dom's lead elements have been sighted.'

'West? He plans to reach the river before us then, as Coltaine predicted.'

List nodded, wiping sweat from his brow. 'Aye. Cavalry, at least thirty companies.'

'If we have to push through thirty companies of soldiers to gain the ford, we'll be held up—'

'And Korbolo's main force will close jaws on our tail, aye. That's why the Fist is sending the Foolish Dog ahead. He asks that you join them. It'll be a hard ride, sir, but your mare's fit – fitter than most, anyway.'

Two *notches up on her girth straps, the bones of her shoulders hard against my knees, yet fitter than most.* 'Six leagues?'

'Closer to seven, sir.'

An *easy afternoon's ride, under normal circumstances.* 'We might well arrive only to wheel mounts and meet a charge.'

'They'll be as weary as we will, sir.'

Not by half, Corporal, and we both know it. Worse, we'll be outnumbered by more than three to one. 'Likely to be a memorable ride, then.'

List nodded, his attention drawn to the forest. 'I've never seen so many butterflies in one place.'

'They migrate, like birds.'

'It's said the river is very low.'

'Good.

'But the crossing's narrow in any case. Most of the river cuts through a gorge.'

'Do you ride in the same fashion, Corporal? Tug one way, tug the other.'

'Just weighing things out, sir.'

'What do your visions reveal of that river?'

List's expression tightened. 'It is a border, sir. Beyond it lies the past.'

'And the rings of stones here on this hill?'

The man started, looking down. 'Hood's breath,' he muttered, then met the historian's eyes.

Duiker crooked a grin, gathered up his reins. 'I see the Foolish Dog's on its way forward. It wouldn't do to have them wait for us.'

A loud yapping bit the air at the vanguard, and as the historian trotted to join the gathered officers he was startled to see, among the cattle-dogs, a small, long-haired lapdog, its once perfectly groomed coat a snarl of tangles and burrs.

'I'd supposed that rat had long since gone through one of the dogs,' Duiker said.

'I'm already wishing it had,' List said. 'That bark hurts the ears. Look at it, prancing around like it rules the pack.'

'Perhaps it does. Attitude, Corporal, has a certain efficacy that should never be underestimated.'

Coltaine swung his horse around at their approach. 'Historian. I have called yet again for the captain of the company of Engineers. I begin to believe the man does not exist – tell me, have you ever seen him?'

Duiker shook his head. 'I am afraid not, although I have been assured that he still lives, Fist.'

'By whom?'

The historian frowned. 'I... I can't actually recall.'

'Precisely. It occurs to me that the sappers have no captain, and they'd rather not acquire one.'

'That would be a rather complicated deceit to carry off, Fist.'

'You feel they are incapable?'

'Oh no, sir, not at all.'

Coltaine waited, but the historian had nothing further to say on the matter, and after a moment the Fist sighed. 'You would ride with the Foolish Dog?'

'Yes, Fist. However, I ask that Corporal List remain here, with the main column—'

'But sir—'

'Not another word from you, Corporal,' Duiker said. 'Fist, he's anything but healed.'

Coltaine nodded.

Bult's horse surged between the Fist and the historian. The veteran's lance darted from his hand, speeding in a blur into the high grasses lining the trail. The yapping lapdog shrieked in alarm and raced off, bounding like a ragged ball of mud and straw. 'Hood's curse!' Bult snarled. 'Again!'

'It's little wonder it won't quieten,' Coltaine commented, 'with you trying to kill it daily.'

'You've been shouted down by a lapdog, Uncle?' Duiker asked, brows rising.

'Careful, old man,' the scarred Wickan growled.

'Time for you to ride,' Coltaine told Duiker, his eyes lighting on a new arrival. The historian turned to see Nether. She was pale, looking drawn into herself. Raw pain still showed in her dark eyes, but she sat straight in her saddle. Her hands were black, including the flesh under her fingernails, as if dipped in pitch.

Sorrow flooded the historian and he had to look away.

The butterflies rose from the track in a swirling cloud as they reached the forest edge. Horses reared, a few stumbling when struck from behind by those that followed, and what had been a scene of unearthly beauty a moment before now threatened chaos and injury. Then, with the mounts skidding and staggering, jostling, heads tossing, a score of cattle-dogs bolted forward, taking the lead. They plunged into the swarms ahead, the insects rising, parting over the road.

Duiker, spitting out ragged wings that tasted of chalk, caught a momentary glimpse of one of the dogs that made him blink and shake his head in disbelief. *No, I didn't see what I thought I saw. Absurd.* The animal was the one known as Bent and it seemed to be carrying a four-limbed snag of fur in its mouth.

Order was restored, the dogs managing to clear the path, and the canter resumed. Before long, Duiker found himself settling into the steady cadence. There was nothing of the usual shouting, jests or Wickan riding songs to accompany the thunder of hooves and the eerie whisper of hundreds of thousands of butterfly wings caressing the air above them.

The journey assumed a surreal quality, sliding into a rhythm that seemed timeless, as if beneath and above the noise they rode a river of silence. To either side the bracken and dead trees gave way to stands of young cedars, too few on this side of the river to be called a forest. Of mature trees only stumps remained. The stands became a backdrop against which pale yellow swirled in endless motion, the fluttering filling Duiker's peripheral vision until his head ached.

They rode at the pace of the cattle-dogs, and those animals proved tireless, far fitter than the horses and riders that followed in their wake. Each hour was marked by a rest spell, the mounts slowed to a walk, the last reserves of water offered in wax-sealed hide bags. The dogs waited impatiently.

The trader track provided the Clan's best chance of reaching the crossing first. Korbolo Dom's cavalry would be riding through the thinned cedar

stands, though what might slow them more than anything else was the butterflies.

When they had travelled slightly over four leagues, a new sound reached them from the west, a strange susurration that Duiker barely registered at first, until its unnatural irregularity brushed him aware. He nudged his mount forward to gain Nether's side.

Her glance of acknowledgement was furtive. 'A mage rides with them, clearing the way.'

'Then the warrens are no longer contested.'

'Not for three days now, Historian.'

'How is this mage destroying the butterflies? Fire? Wind?'

'No, he simply opens his warren and they vanish within. Note, the time is longer between each effort – the man tires.'

'Well, that's good.'

She nodded.

'Will we reach the crossing before them?'

'I believe so.'

A short while later they came to a second cleared verge. Beyond it, rock pushed up from the earth to the east and west, creating a ragged line against the insect-filled sky. Directly ahead, the track began a downward slope along the path of a pebble-filled moraine, and at its base was a broad clearing, beyond which was revealed a flattened yellow carpet of butterflies that moved in a mass eastward.

The River *Vathar. The funeral procession of drowned insects, down to the sea.*

The crossing itself was marked by twin lines of wooden poles spanning the river, each pole bearing tied rags, like the faded standards of a drowned army. On the eastern downstream side, just beyond the poles, a large ship rested at anchor, bow into the current.

The breath hissed from Nether upon seeing it, and Duiker felt his own tremble of disquiet.

The ship had been burned, scorched in fire from one end to the other, making it entirely black, and not a single butterfly had alighted on it. The sweeps of oars – many snapped – jutted in disarray from the craft's flanks; those with blades were dipped into the current and dead insects adhered to them in lumps.

The Clan rode down towards the open flat that marked this side of the crossing. A sailcloth awning stood on poles near a small hearth which smouldered with foul smoke. Beneath the makeshift tent sat three men.

The cattle-dogs ringed them at a wary distance.

Duiker winced at a sudden yapping bark. *Gods below, I didn't imagine it!*

The historian and Nether rode up to halt near the restlessly circling dogs. One of the men beneath the awning, his face and forearms a strangely burnished bronze hue, rose from the coil of rope he'd been sitting on and stepped out.

The lapdog rushed him, then skidded to a halt, its barks ceasing. A ratty tail managed a fitful wag.

The man crouched down, picked up the dog and scratched it behind its mangy ears. He eyed the Wickans. 'So who else claims to be in charge of this scary herd?' he asked in Malazan.

'I am,' said Nether.

The man scowled. 'It figures,' he muttered.

Duiker frowned. There was something very familiar about these men. 'What does that mean?'

'Let's just say I've had my fill of imperious little girls. I'm Corporal Gesler and that's our ship, the *Silanda.'*

'Few would choose that name these days, Corporal,' the historian said.

'We ain't inviting a curse. This *is* the *Silanda.* We come on her ... somewhere far from here. So, are you what's left of them Wickans as landed in Hissar?'

Nether spoke. 'How did you come to be awaiting us, Corporal?'

'We didn't, lass. We was just outside Ubaryd Bay, only the city had already fallen and we saw more than one unfriendly sail about, so we holed up here, planning to make passage tonight. We decided to make for Aren—'

'Hood's breath!' Duiker exclaimed. 'You're the marines from the village! The night of the uprising ...'

Gesler scowled at the historian. 'You were the one with Kulp, weren't you —'

'Aye, it's him,' Stormy said, rising from his stool and approaching. 'Fener's hoof, never thought to see you again.'

'I imagine,' Duiker managed, 'you've a tale to tell.'

The veteran grinned. 'You got that right.'

Nether spoke, her eyes on the *Silanda.* 'Corporal Gesler, what's your complement?'

Three.'

'The ship's crew?'

'Dead.'

Had he not been so weary, the historian would have noted a certain dryness to that reply.

The eight hundred horsewarriors of the Foolish Dog Clan set up three corrals in the centre of the clearing, then began establishing perimeter defences. Scouts struck out through the stands to the west, returning almost immediately with the news that Korbolo Dom's advance outriders had

arrived. Weapons were readied among an outer line of defenders, while the rest of the warriors continued the entrenchments.

Duiker dismounted near the awning, as did Nether. As Truth joined Stormy and Gesler outside the awning, Duiker saw that they all shared the same bronze cast to their skin. All three were beardless and their pates sported the short stubble of recent growth.

Despite the chorus of questions crowding his thoughts, the historian's eyes were drawn to the *Silanda*. 'You've no sails left, Corporal. Are you suggesting that the three of you man oars and rudder?'

Gesler turned to Stormy. 'Ready weapons – these Wickans are already worn down to the bone. Truth, to the dory – we may need to yank our arses out of here fast.' He swung back to study the historian. *'Silanda* goes on her own, y'might say – I doubt we got time to explain, though. This ragtag mess of Wickans are face to face with a last stand, from the looks of it – we might be able to take a hundred or so, if you ain't fussy about the company you'd be in—'

'Corporal,' Duiker snapped. 'This "ragtag mess" is part of the Seventh. You are Marines—'

'Coastal. Remember? We ain't officially in the Seventh and I don't care if you was Kulp's long-lost brother, if you're of a mind to use that tone on me, you'd better start telling me about the tragic loss of your uniform and maybe I'll buy the song and start callin' you "sir" or maybe I won't and you'll get your nose busted flat.'

Duiker blinked – I *seem to recall we've gone through something like this once before* – then continued slowly, 'You are Marines and Fist Coltaine might well be interested in your story, and as Imperial Historian so am I. The Coastal detachments were headquartered in Sialk, meaning Captain Lull is your commander. No doubt he too will want to hear your report. Finally, the rest of the Seventh and two additional Wickan clans are on their way here, along with close to forty-five thousand refugees. Gentlemen, wherever you came from to get here, here you are, meaning you are back in the Imperial Army.'

Stormy stepped forward to squint at Duiker. 'Kulp had a lot to say about you, Historian, though I can't quite recall if any of it was good.' He hesitated, then cradled his crossbow in one arm and held out a thick, hairless hand. 'Even so, I've dreamed of meeting the bastard to blame for all we've been through, though I wish we still had a certain grumpy old man with us so I could wrap him in ribbons and stuff him down your throat.'

'That was said in great affection,' Gesler drawled.

Duiker ignored the proffered hand, and after a moment the soldier withdrew it with a shrug. 'I need to know,' the historian said in a low voice, 'what happened to Kulp.'

'We wouldn't mind knowing that, too,' Stormy said.

Two of the Clan's warleaders came down to speak with Nether. She frowned at their words.

Duiker pulled his attention away from the marines. 'What is happening, Nether?'

She gestured and the warleaders withdrew. 'The cavalry are establishing a camp upriver, less than three hundred paces away. They are making no preparations to attack. They've begun felling trees.'

'Trees? Both banks are high cliffs up there.'

She nodded.

Unless *they're simply building a palisade, not a floating bridge, which would be pointless in any case – they can't hope to span the gorge, can they?*

Gesler spoke behind them. 'We could take the dory upstream for a closer look.'

Nether turned, her eyes hard as they fixed on the corporal. 'What is wrong with your ship?' she demanded in a febrile tone.

Gesler shrugged. 'Got a little singed, but she's still seaworthy.'

She said nothing, her gaze unwavering.

The corporal grimaced, reached under his burnt jerkin and withdrew a bone whistle that hung by a cord around his neck. 'The crew's dead but that don't slow 'em any.'

'Had their heads chopped off, too,' Stormy said, startling the historian with a bright grin. 'Just can't hold good sailors down, I always say.'

'Mostly Tiste Andii,' Gesler added, 'only a handful of humans. And some others, in the cabin ... Stormy, what did Heboric call 'em?'

'Tiste Edur, sir.'

Gesler nodded, his attention now on the historian. 'Aye, us and Kulp plucked Heboric from the island, just like you wanted. Him and two others. The bad news is we lost them in a squall—'

'Overboard?' Duiker asked in a croak, his thoughts a maelstrom. 'Dead?'

'Well,' said Stormy, 'we can't be sure of that. Don't know if they hit water when they jumped over the side – we was on fire, you see and it might have been wet waves we was riding, then again it might not.'

A part of the historian wanted to throttle both men, cursing the soldiers' glorious and excruciating love of understatement. The other part, the rocking shock of what he was hearing, dropped him with a jarring thud to the muddy, butterfly-carpeted ground.

'Historian, accompany these marines in the dory,' Nether said, 'but be sure to keep well out from shore. Their mage is exhausted, so you need not worry about him. I must understand what is happening.'

Oh, we *are agreed in* that, lass.

Gesler reached down and gently lifted Duiker upright. 'Come along now, sir, and Stormy will spin the tale while we're about it. It's not that we're coy, you see, we're just stupid.'

Stormy grunted. 'Then when I'm done, you could tell us how Coltaine and all the rest managed to live this long. Now that'll surely be a story worth hearing.'

'It's the butterflies, you see,' Stormy grunted as he pulled on the oars. 'A solid foot of 'em, moving slower than the current underneath. Without that, we'd be making no gain at all.'

'We've paddled worse,' Gesler added.

'So I gather,' Duiker said. They'd been sitting in the small rowboat for over an hour, during which time Stormy and Truth had managed to pull them a little over a hundred and fifty paces upriver through the thick sludge of drowned butterflies. The north bank had quickly risen to a steep cliff, festooned with creepers, vines covering its pitted face. They were approaching a sharp bend in the gorge created by a recent collapse on that side.

Stormy had spun his tale, allowing for his poor narrative skills, and it was his painfully obvious lack of imagination that lent it the greatest credence. Duiker was left with the bleak task of attempting to comprehend the significance of the events these soldiers had witnessed. That the warren of fire they had survived had changed the three men was obvious, and went beyond the strange hue of their skin. Stormy and Truth were tireless at the oars, and pulled with a strength to match twice their number. Duiker both longed to board the *Silanda* and dreaded it. Even without Nether's mage-heightened sensitivity, the aura of horror emanating from that craft preyed on the historian's senses.

'Will you look at that, sir,' Gesler said.

They had edged into the river's awkward crook. The collapsed cliffside had narrowed the channel, creating a churning, white-frothed torrent through the gap. A dozen taut ropes spanned the banks at a height of over ten arm-spans. A dozen Ubari archers in harnesses were making their way across the gulf.

'Easy pickings,' Gesler said from the tiller, 'and Stormy's the man for the task. Can you hold us in place, Truth?'

'I can try,' the young man said.

'Wait,' Duiker said. 'This is one hornet's nest we're better off not stirring up, Corporal. Our advance force is seriously outnumbered. Besides, look to the other side – at least a hundred soldiers have already gone over.' He fell silent, thinking.

'If they was chopping down trees, it wasn't to build a bridge,' the corporal muttered, squinting at the north cliff edge, where figures appeared every now and then. 'Someone in charge's just come for a look at us, sir.'

Duiker's gaze narrowed on the figure. 'Likely the mage. Well, if we won't bite, hopefully neither will he.'

'Makes a nice target, though,' Gesler mused.

The historian shook his head. 'Let's head back, Corporal.'

'Aye, sir. Ease up there, lads.'

The mass of Korbolo Dom's forces had arrived, taking position to either side of the ford. The sparse forest was fast disappearing as every tree in sight was felled, the branches stripped and the trunks carried deeper into the encampment. A no-man's zone of less than seventy paces separated the two forces. The trader track had been left open.

Duiker found Nether seated cross-legged beneath the awning, her eyes closed. The historian waited, suspecting that she was in sorcerous communication with Sormo. After a few minutes she sighed. 'What news?' she asked, eyes still shut.

'They've strung lines across the gorge and are sending archers to the other side. What is happening, Nether? Why hasn't Korbolo Dom attacked? He could crush us and not break into a sweat.'

'Coltaine is less than two hours away. It seems the enemy commander would wait.'

'He should have heeded the lesson of Kamist Reloe's arrogance.'

'A new Fist and a renegade Fist – does it surprise you that Korbolo Dom would choose to make this contest personal?'

'No, but it certainly justifies Empress Laseen's dismissal of Dom.'

'Fist Coltaine was chosen over him. Indeed, the Empress had made it clear that Korbolo would never advance further in the Imperial Command. The renegade feels he has something to prove. With Kamist Reloe, we faced battles of brute strength. But now,' we shall see battles of wits.'

'If Coltaine comes to us, he will be stepping into the jaws of a dragon, and that's hardly disguised.'

'He comes.'

'Then perhaps arrogance has cursed both commands.'

Nether opened her eyes. 'Where is the corporal?'

Duiker shrugged. 'Somewhere. Not far.'

'The Silanda shall take as many wounded soldiers as it can carry – those who will eventually mend, that is. To Aren. Coltaine enquires if you wish to accompany them, Historian.'

Not arrogance at all, then, but fatal acceptance. He knew he should have hesitated, given the suggestion sober thought, but heard his own voice reply, 'No.'

She nodded. 'He knew you would answer thus, and say it quickly as well.' Frowning, she searched Duiker's face. 'How does Coltaine know such things?'

Duiker was startled. 'You are asking me? Hood's breath, lass, the man's a Wickan!'

'And no less a cipher to us, Historian. The clans do as he commands and say nothing. It is not shared certainty or mutual understanding that breeds our silence. It is awe.'

Duiker could say nothing to that. He found himself turning away, eyes caught and gathered into the sky's sweeping blurs of pale yellow. *They*

migrate. Creatures of instinct. A mindless plunge into fatal currents. A beautiful, horrifying dance to Hood, every step *mapped out. Every step . . .*

The Fist arrived in darkness, the warriors of the Crow slipping forward to establish a corridor down which the vanguard rode, followed by the wagons burdened with those wounded that had been selected for the *Silanda.*

Coltaine, his face gaunt and lined with exhaustion, strode down to where Duiker, Nether and Gesler waited near the awning. Behind the Fist came Bult, captains Lull and Sulmar, Corporal List and the warlocks Sormo and Nil.

Lull strode up to Gesler.

The marine corporal scowled. 'You ain't as pretty as I remembered, sir.'

'I know you by reputation, Gesler. Once a captain, then a sergeant, now a corporal. You've got your boots to the sky on the ladder—'

'And head in the horseshit, aye, sir.'

'Two left in your squad?'

'Well, one officially, sir. The lad's sort of a recruit, though not properly inducted, like. So, just me and Stormy, sir.'

'Stormy? Not Cartheron Fist's Adjutant Stormy—'

'Once upon a time.'

'Hood's breath!' Lull swung to Coltaine. 'Fist, we've got two of the Emperor's Old Guard here ... as Coastal Marines.'

'It was a quiet posting, sir, until the uprising, anyway.'

Lull loosed his helm strap, pulled the helm from his head and ran a hand through sparse, sweat-plastered hair. He faced Gesler again. 'Call your lad forward, Corporal.'

Gesler beckoned and Truth stepped into view.

Lull scowled. 'You're now officially in the Marines, lad.'

Truth saluted, thumb pulled in and pinning the little finger.

Bult snorted. Captain Lull's scowl deepened. 'Where – oh, don't bother.' He addressed Gesler again. 'As for you and Stormy—'

'If you promote us, sir, I will punch you in what's left of your face. And Stormy will likely kick you while you're down. Sir.' Gesler then smiled.

Bult pushed past Lull and stood face to face with the corporal, their noses almost touching. 'And, Corporal,' the commander hissed, 'would you punch me as well?'

Gesler's smile did not waver. 'Yes, sir. And Hood take me, I'll give the Fist's crack-thong a yank too, if you ask sweetly.'

There was a moment of dead silence.

Coltaine burst out laughing. The shock of it brought Duiker and the others around to stare at the Wickan.

Muttering his disbelief, Bult stepped back from Gesler, met the historian's eyes and simply shook his head.

Coltaine's laughter set the dogs to wild howling, the animals suddenly close and swarming about like pallid ghosts.

Animated for the first time and still laughing, Coltaine spun to the corporal. 'And what would Cartheron Crust have said to that, soldier?'

'He'd have punched me in the—'

Gesler got no further as Coltaine's fist lashed out and caught the corporal flush on the nose. The marine's head snapped back, his feet leaving the ground. He fell on his back with a heavy thud. Coltaine wheeled around, clutching his hand as if he'd just connected with a stone wall.

Sormo stepped forward and grasped the Fist's wrist to examine the hand. 'Spirits below, it's shattered!'

All eyes swung to the supine corporal, who now sat up, blood gushing from his nose.

Both Nil and Nether hissed, lurching back from the man. Duiker grasped Nether's shoulder and pulled her around. 'What is it, lass? What's wrong—'

Nil answered, his voice a whisper. *'That blood – that man has almost ascended!'*

Gesler did not hear the comment. His gaze was on Coltaine. 'I guess I'll take that promotion now, Fist,' he said through split lips.

'*—almost ascended. Yet the Fist. . .'* Both warlocks now stared at Coltaine, and for the first time Duiker could clearly see the awe in their expressions.

Coltaine cracked open Gesler's face. Gesler, a man on the edge of Ascendancy . . . and into what? The historian thought back to Stormy and Truth manning the dory's sweeps ... their extraordinary strength, and the tale of the burning warren. *Abyss below,* all *three of them . . . And . . . Coltaine?*

There was such confusion among the group that none heard the slow approach of horses, until Corporal List grunted, 'Commander Bult, we have visitors.'

They turned, with the exception of Coltaine and Sormo, to see half a dozen Crow horsewarriors surrounding an Ubari officer wearing silver inlaid scale armour. The stranger's dark face was shrouded in beard and moustache, the curls dyed black. He was unarmed, and now held out both hands to the sides, palms forward.

'I bring greetings from Korbolo Dom, Humblest Servant of Sha'ik, Commander of the South Army of the Apocalypse, to Fist Coltaine and the officers of the Seventh Army.'

Bult stepped forward, but it was Coltaine, now standing straight, his broken hand behind his back, who spoke. 'Our thanks for that. What does he want?'

A new handful of figures rushed into the gathering, and Duiker scowled as he recognized Nethpara and Pullyk Alar at their head.

'Korbolo Dom wishes only peace, Fist Coltaine, and as proof of his honour he spared your Wickan riders who came here to this crossing earlier today – when he could have destroyed them utterly. The Malazan Empire has been driven from six of the Seven Holy Cities. All lands north of here are now free. We would see an end to the slaughter, Fist. Aren's independence can be negotiated, to the gain of Empress Laseen's treasury.'

Coltaine said nothing.

The emissary hesitated, then continued. 'As yet further proof of our peaceful intentions, the crossing of the refugees to the south bank will not be contested – after all, Korbolo Dom well knows that it is those elements that provide the greatest difficulty to you and your forces. Your soldiers can well defend themselves – this we all have seen, to your glory. Indeed, our own warriors sing to honour your prowess. You are truly an army worthy of challenging our goddess.' He paused, twisting in his saddle to look at the gathered nobles. 'But these worthy citizens, ah, this war is not theirs.' He faced Coltaine again. 'Your journey across the wastelands beyond the forest shall be difficult enough – we shall not pursue to add to your tribulations, Fist. Go in peace. Send the refugees across the Vathar tomorrow, and you will see for yourselves – and without risk to your own soldiers – Korbolo Dom's mercy.'

Pullyk Alar stepped forward. 'The Council trusts in Korbolo Dom's word on this,' he announced. 'Give us leave to cross tomorrow, Fist.'

Duiker frowned. *There has been communication.*

The Fist ignored the nobleman. 'Take words back to Korbolo Dom, Emissary. The offer is rejected. I am done speaking.'

'But Fist—'

Coltaine turned his back, his ragged feather cape glistening like bronze scales in the firelight.

The Crow horsewarriors closed around the emissary and forced the man's mount around.

Pullyk Alar and Nethpara rushed towards the officers. 'He must reconsider!'

'Out of our sight,' Bult growled, 'or I shall have your hides for a new tent. Out!'

The pair of noblemen retreated.

Bult glared about until he found Gesler. 'Ready your ship, Captain.'

'Aye, sir.'

Stormy muttered beside the historian, 'None of this smells right, sir.'

Duiker slowly nodded.

Leoman led them unerringly across the clay plain, through impenetrable darkness, to another cache of supplies, this one stored beneath a lone slab of limestone. As he unwrapped the hardbread, dried meat and fruits, Felisin sat down on the cool ground and wrapped her arms around herself in an effort to stop shivering.

Heboric sat beside her. 'Still no sign of the Toblakai. With Oponn's luck bits of him are souring that Soletaken's stomach.'

'He fights like no other,' Leoman said, sharing out the food. 'And that is why Sha'ik chose him—'

'An obvious miscalculation,' the ex-priest said. 'The woman's dead.'

'Her third guardian would have prevented that, but Sha'ik relinquished its binding. I sought to change her mind, but failed. All foreseen, each of us trapped within our roles.'

'Convenient, that. Tell me, is the prophecy as clear on the rebellion's end? Do we now face a triumphant age of Apocalypse unending? Granted, there's an inherent contradiction, but never mind that.'

'Raraku and Dryjhna are one,' Leoman said. 'As eternal as chaos and death. Your Malazan Empire is but a brief flare, already fading. We are born

from darkness and to darkness we return. These are the truths you so fear, and in your fear discount.'

'I am no-one's marionette,' Felisin snapped.

Leoman's only reply to that was a soft laugh.

'If this is what becoming Sha'ik demands, then you'd better go back to that withered corpse at the gate and wait for someone else to show up.'

'Becoming Sha'ik shall not shatter your delusions of independence,' Leoman said, 'unless, of course, you will it.'

Listen to us. Too dark to see a thing. We are naught *but three disembodied voices in futile counterpoint, here on this desert stage. Holy Raraku mocks our flesh, makes of us no more than sounds at war with a vast silence.*

Soft footfalls approached.

'Come and eat,' Leoman called out.

Something slapped wetly to the ground close to Felisin. The stench of raw meat wafted over her.

'A bear with white fur,' the Toblakai rumbled. 'For a moment, I dreamed I had returned to my home in Laederon. Nethaur, we call such beasts. But we fought on sand and rock, not snow and ice. I have brought its skin and its head and its claws, for the beast was twice as large as any I'd seen before.'

'Oh, I just can't wait for daylight,' Heboric said.

'The next dawn is the last before the oasis,' the giant savage said to Leoman. 'She must undertake the ritual.'

There was silence.

Heboric cleared his throat. 'Felisin—'

'Four voices,' she whispered. 'No bone, no flesh, just these feeble noises that claim their selves. Four points of view. The Toblakai is pure faith, yet he shall one day lose it all—'

'It has begun,' Leoman murmured.

'And Heboric, the rendered priest without faith, who shall one day discover it anew. Leoman, the master deceiver, who sees the world with eyes more cynical than Heboric in his fitting blindness, yet is ever searching the darkness ... for hope.

'And finally, Felisin. Ah, now who is this woman in a child's raiment? Pleasures of the flesh devoid of pleasure. Selves surrendered one after another. Kindness yearned for behind every cruel word she utters. She believes in nothing. A crucible fired clean, empty. Heboric possesses hands unseen and what they now grasp is a power and a truth that he cannot yet sense. Felisin's hands ... ah, they have grasped and touched, they have been slick and they have been soiled, and yet have held nothing. Life slips through them like a ghost.

'All was incomplete, Leoman, until Heboric and I came to you. You and your tragic child companion. The Book, Leoman.'

She heard him remove the clasps, heard the tome pulled free of its hide wrapping. 'Open it,' she told him.

'You must open it – nor is it dawn! The ritual—'

'Open it.'

'You—'

'Where is your faith, Leoman? You do not understand, do you? The test is not mine alone. The test is for each of us. Here. Now. Open the Book, Leoman.'

She heard his harsh breathing, heard it slow, heard it gentled by a fierce will. The skin cover crackled softly.

'What do you see, Leoman?'

He grunted. 'Nothing, of course. There is no light to see by.'

'Look again.'

She heard him and the others gasp. A glow the colour of spun gold had begun emanating from the Book of Dryjhna. On all sides came a distant

whisper, then a roar. 'The Whirlwind awakens – but not here, not in the heart of Raraku. The Book, Leoman, what do you see?'

He reached down to touch the first page, peeled it back, then the next, then the one after that. 'But this is not possible – it is blank! Every page!'

'You see what you see, Leoman. Close the Book, give it to the Toblakai, now.'

The giant edged forward and crouched down, his massive, bloodstained hands accepting the Book. He did not hesitate.

A warm light bathed his face as he stared down at the first page. She saw tears fill his eyes and run crooked tracks down his scarred cheeks.

'Such beauty,' she whispered to him. 'And beauty makes you weep. Do you know why you feel such sorrow? No, not yet. One day... Close the Book, Toblakai.

'Heboric—'

'No.'

Leoman slid a dagger free, but was stilled by Felisin's hand.

'No,' the ex-priest repeated. 'My touch—'

'Aye,' she said. 'Your *touch.'*

'No.'

'You were tested before, Heboric, and you failed. Oh, how you failed. You fear you will fail again—'

'I do not, Felisin,' Heboric's tone was sharp, certain. 'That least of all. I shall not be part of this ritual, nor shall I risk laying hands on that cursed Book.'

'What matter if he opens the Book?' the Toblakai growled. 'He's as blind as an enkar'al. Let me kill him, Sha'ik Reborn. Let his blood seal this ritual.'

'Do it.'

The Toblakai moved in a blur, the wooden sword almost unseen as it slashed for Heboric's head. Had it struck it would have shattered the old man's skull, spraying bits of it for ten paces or more. Instead, Heboric's hands flared, one the hue of dried blood, the other bestial and fur-backed. They shot up to intercept the swing, each closing on one of the giant's wrists – and stopping the swing dead. The wooden sword flew out of the Toblakai's hands, vanishing into the darkness beyond the Book's pale glow.

The giant grunted in pain.

Heboric released the Toblakai's wrists, grasped the giant by his neck and belt, then, in a surge, threw him out into the darkness. There was a thud as he struck and the clay trembled beneath their feet.

Heboric staggered back, his face twisted in shock, and the blazing rage that entwined his hands winked out.

'We could see, then,' Felisin told him. 'Your hands. You were never forsaken, Heboric, no matter what the priests may have believed when they did what they did. You were simply being *prepared.'*

The old man fell to his knees.

'And so a man's faith is born anew. Know this: Fener would never risk investing you and you alone, Heboric Light Touch. Think on that, and be at ease ...'

Out in the darkness, the Toblakai groaned.

Felisin rose to her feet. 'I shall have the Book now, Leoman. Come the dawn.' *Felisin, surrendering herself yet again. Remade. Reborn. Is this the last time? Oh no, it most certainly is not.*

With dawn an hour away, Icarium led the others to the edge of the warren. Hitching the stock of his crossbow on one hip, Fiddler handed Crokus the lantern, then glanced over at Mappo.

The Trell shrugged. 'The barrier is opaque – nothing of what lies beyond is visible.'

'They know nothing of what is to come,' Iskaral Pust whispered. 'An eternal flare of pain, but shall I waste words in an effort to prepare them? No, not at all, never. Words are too precious to be wasted, hence my coy silence while they hesitate in a fit of immobile ignorance.'

Fiddler gestured with the crossbow. 'You go first, Pust.'

The High Priest gaped. 'Me?' he squealed. 'Are you mad?' He ducked his head. 'They are deceived again, even that gnarled excuse for a soldier – oh, this is too easy!'

Hissing, Crokus stepped forward, raising the lantern high, then strode through the barrier, vanishing from the others. Icarium immediately followed.

With a growl, Fiddler gestured Iskaral Pust forward.

As the two disappeared, Mappo swung to Apsalar and her father. 'You two have been through once before,' he said. 'The warren's aura clings to you both.'

Rellock nodded. 'The false trail. We had to make sure of the D'ivers and Soletaken.'

The Trell swung his gaze to Apsalar. 'What warren is this?'

'I don't know. It has indeed been torn apart. There is little hope of determining its nature given the state it's now in. And my memories tell me nothing of such a warren so destroyed.'

Mappo sighed, rolling his shoulders to ease the tension binding his muscles. 'Ah, well, why assume that the Elder Warrens we know of – Tellann, Omtose Phellack, Kurald Galain – are the only ones that existed?'

The barrier was marked by a change in air pressure. Mappo swallowed and felt his ears pop. He blinked, his senses struggling to manage the flood that rushed upon them. The Trell stood with the others in a forest of towering trees, a mix of spruce, cedar and redwood all thickly braided in moss. Blue-tinged sunlight filtered down. The air smelled of decaying

vegetation and insects buzzed. The scene's ethereal beauty descended on Mappo like a cooling balm.

'Don't know what I was expecting,' Fiddler muttered, 'but it wasn't this.'

A large dolomite boulder, taller than Icarium, rose from the mulch directly ahead. Sunlight bathed it in pale green, lifting into view the shadows of grooves, pits and other shapes carved into its surface.

'The sun never moves,' Apsalar said beside the Trell. 'The light is ever at that angle, the only angle that raises those carvings to our eyes.'

The base and sides of the boulder were a mass of hand and paw prints, every one the colour of blood.

The Path of Hands. Mappo turned to Iskaral Pust. 'More of your deceit, High Priest?'

'A lone boulder in a forest? Free of lichen and moss, bleached by another world's harsh sun? The Trell is dense beyond belief, but listen to this!' He offered Mappo a wide smile. Absolutely not! How could I move such an edifice? And look at those ancient carvings, those pits and whorls, how could such things be faked?'

Icarium had walked up to stand before the boulder. He followed the wending track of one of the grooves. 'No, these are real enough. Yet they are Tellann, the kind you would find at a site sacred to the T'lan Imass – the boulder typically surmounting a hilltop on a tundra or plain. I would not expect, of course, that the D'ivers and Soletaken could be aware of such an incongruity—'

'Of course not!' Iskaral burst out, then he frowned at the Jhag. 'Why do you stop?'

'How could I otherwise? You interrupted me—'

'A lie! But no, I must stuff my outrage into a bag, a bag such as the curious sack the Trell carries – such a curious sack, that! Is there another fragment trapped within it? The possibility is ... possible. A likely likelihood, indeed, a certain certainty! I need but turn this ingenuous smile

on the Jhag to show my benign patience at his foul insult, for I am a bigger man than he, oh yes. All his airs, his posturing, his poorly disguised asides – hark!' Iskaral Pust spun around, squinted into the forest beyond the boulder.

'Do you hear something, High Priest?' Icarium asked calmly.

'Hear, here?' Pust scowled. 'Why ask me that?'

Mappo asked Apsalar, 'How far into this wood have you gone?'

She shook her head. *Not far.*

'I'll take point,' Fiddler said. 'Straight ahead, I take it, past this rock?'

There were no alternative suggestions.

They set off, Fiddler ranging ahead, crossbow readied at hip-level, a Moranth quarrel set in the groove. Icarium followed, his bow still strapped on his back, sword sheathed. Pust, Apsalar and her father were next, with Crokus a few paces ahead of Mappo, who was the column's rearguard.

Mappo could not be sure of matching the Jhag's speed in responding to a threat, so he removed the bone mace from his sack. *Do I in truth carry a fragment of this warren within this tattered ruck? How fare my hapless victims, then? Perhaps I have sent them to paradise – a thought to ease my conscience . . .*

The Trell had travelled old forests before and this one was little different. The sounds of birds were few and far between, and apart from insects and the trees and plants themselves, there was no other indication of life. It would be easy enough to lose grip on imagination's reins in such a place, if one were so inclined, to fashion a brooding presence from the primeval atmosphere. A *place to ravel dark legends, to make us no more than children shivering to fraught tales . . . bah, what nonsense! The only brooding thing here is me.*

The roots were thick underfoot, a latticework revealing itself here and there through the humus, spreading out to bridge the gap between every tree. The air grew cooler as they journeyed on, abandoning its rich smells,

and it eventually became apparent that the trees were thinning out, the spaces between them stretching from a few paces to half a dozen, then a dozen. Yet still the knotted roots remained thickly woven on the ground – too many to be explained by the forest itself. The sight of them triggered hints of a vaguely disturbing memory in Mappo, yet he could not track it down.

They could now see five hundred paces ahead, a vista of sentinel boles and damp air tinted blue under the strange sun's spectral light. Nothing moved. No-one spoke, and the only sound was their breathing, the rustle of clothing and armour, and the tread of their feet on the endless mat of entwined tree roots.

An hour later they reached the outer edge of the forest. Beyond it lay a dark, rolling plain.

Fiddler drew the company to a halt. 'Any thoughts on this?' he asked, staring out over the bare, undulating landscape that lay ahead.

The ground before them was a solid weave, a riotous twisting of serpentine roots that stretched off into the distance.

Icarium crouched and laid a hand on one thick, coiled span of wood. He closed his eyes, then nodded. The Jhag straightened. 'The Azath,' he said.

'Tremorlor,' Fiddler muttered.

'I have never seen an Azath manifest itself in this way,' Mappo said. *No, not an Azath, but I have seen staves of wood . . .*

'I have,' Crokus said. 'In Darujhistan. The Azath House there grew from the ground, like the stump of a tree. I saw it with my own eyes. It rose to contain a Jaghut's Finnest.'

Mappo studied the youth for a long moment, then he turned to the Jhag. 'What else did you sense, Icarium?'

'Resistance. Pain. The Azath is under siege. This fragmented warren seeks to pull free of the House's grip. And now, an added threat. . .'

'The Soletaken and D'ivers.'

'Tremorlor is... aware ... of those who seek it.'

Iskaral Pust cackled, then ducked at a glare from Crokus.

'Including us, I take it,' Fiddler said.

Icarium nodded. 'Aye.'

'And it means to defend itself,' the Trell said.

'If it can.'

Mappo scratched his jaw. The responses *of a living entity.*

'We should stop here,' Fiddler said. 'Get some sleep—'

'Oh no, you mustn't!' Iskaral Pust said. 'Urgency!'

'Whatever lies ahead,' the sapper growled, 'can wait. If we're not rested—'

'I agree with Fiddler,' Icarium said. 'A few hours ...'

The camp was haphazard, bedrolls set out in silence, a scant meal shared. Mappo watched the others settling down until only he and Rellock remained awake. The Trell joined the old man as he prepared his own bedding.

Mappo spoke in a low voice, 'Why did you obey Iskaral's commands, Rellock? To draw your daughter to this place ... into these circumstances ...'

The fisherman grimaced, visibly struggling towards a reply. 'I was gifted, sir, with this here arm. Our lives were spared—'

'As you said before, and you were delivered to Iskaral. To a fortress in a desert. Where you were made to draw your only child into danger ... I am sorry if I offend, Rellock. I seek only to understand.'

'She ain't what she was. Not my little girl. No.' He hesitated, hands twitching where they rested on the bedroll. 'No,' he repeated, 'what's done is done, and there's no going back.' He looked up. 'Got to make the best of how things are. My girl knows things ...' He glanced away, eyes narrowing

as he stared at something only he could see. 'Terrible things. But, well, there's a child still there – I can see it. All that she knows ... Well –' he fixed Mappo with a glare – 'knowing ain't enough. It ain't enough.' He scowled, then shook his head and looked away. 'I can't explain—'

'I am following you so far.'

With a sigh, Rellock resumed, 'She needs reasons. Reasons for everything. It's my feeling, anyway. I'm her father, and I say she's got more learning to do. It's no different from being out on the water – you learn no place safe. Not real learning. No place safe, Trell.' Shaking himself, he rose. 'Now you gone and made my head ache.'

'Forgive me,' Mappo said.

'If I'm lucky, she might do that for me one day.'

The Trell watched him finish laying out the bedroll. Mappo rose and headed to where he'd left his sack. We *learn no place safe.' Whatever sea god looks down on you, old man, must surely fix an eye on his lost child now.*

Muffled in his bedrolls, unable to sleep, Mappo heard move' ment behind him, then Icarium's low voice.

'Best get back to sleep, lass.'

The Trell heard wry amusement in her reply. 'We're much alike, you and I.'

'How so?' Icarium asked.

She sighed. 'We each have our protectors – neither of whom is capable of protecting us. Especially not from ourselves. So they're dragged along, helpless, ever watchful, but so very helpless.'

Icarium's reply was measured and toneless. 'Mappo is a companion to me, a friend. Rellock is your father. I understand his notion of protection – what else is a father to do? But it is a different thing, Mappo and me.'

'Is it now?'

Mappo held his breath, ready to rise, to close this conversation now—

Apsalar continued after a moment. 'Perhaps you are right, Icarium. We are less alike than it first seemed. Tell me, what will you do with your memories once you find them?'

The Trell's silent relief was but momentary. Yet now he did not struggle with an urge to intervene; rather, he held himself very still, waiting to hear the reply to a question he had never dared ask Icarium.

'Your question ... startles me, Apsalar. What do you do with yours?'

'They are not mine – most of them, anyway. I have a handful of images from my life as a fishergirl. Bargaining in a market for twine. Holding my father's hand over a cairn where cut flowers lay scattered on the weathered stones, a feel of lichen where once I touched skin. Loss, bewilderment – I must have been very young.

'Other memories belong to a wax witch, an old woman who sought to protect me during Cotillion's possession. She'd lost a husband, children, all sacrificed to Imperial glory. You'd think, wouldn't you, that bitterness would overwhelm all else within such a woman? But not so. Helpless to protect her loved ones, her instincts – so long bottled up – embraced me instead. And do so to this day, Icarium ...'

'An extraordinary gift, lass ...'

'Indeed. Finally, my last set of borrowed memories – the most confusing of all. An assassin's. Once mortal, then Ascendant. Assassins bow to the altar of efficiency, Icarium, and efficiency is brutal. It sacrifices mortal lives without a second thought, all for whatever is perceived as the greater need. At least it was so in the case of Dancer, who did not kill for coin, but for a cause that was less self-aggrandizing than you might think. In his mind, he was a man who fixed things. He viewed himself as honourable. A man of integrity, was Dancer. But efficiency is a cold-blooded master. And there's a final irony. A part of him, in defiance of his need to seek vengeance upon Laseen, actually . .. sympathizes. After all, she bowed to what she perceived

as a greater need – one of Empire – and chose to sacrifice two men she called friends to answer that need.'

'Within you, then, is chaos.'

'Aye, Icarium. Such are memories in full flood. We are not simple creatures. You dream that with memories will come knowledge, and from knowledge, understanding. But for every answer you find, a thousand new questions arise. All that we were has led us to where we are, but tells us little of where we're going. Memories are a weight you can never shrug off.'

A stubborn tone was evident as Icarium muttered, 'A burden I would accept nonetheless.'

'Let me offer some advice. Do not say that to Mappo, unless you wish to further break his heart.'

The Trell's blood was a thunder coursing through him, his chest aching with a breath held overlong.

'I do not understand,' Icarium said quietly after a time, 'but I would never do that, lass.'

Mappo let the air loose, slowly, struggling to control himself. He felt tears run crooked tracks from the corners of his eyes.

'I do not understand.' This time, the words were a whisper.

'Yet you wish to.'

There was no reply to that. A minute passed, then there came to Mappo sounds of movement. 'Here, Icarium,' Apsalar said, 'dry those eyes. Jhag never weep.'

Sleep eluded Mappo and, he suspected, there were others among the group for whom rest offered no surcease from tortured thoughts. Only Iskaral Pust seemed at ease, if his groaning snores were any indication.

Before long, Mappo heard the sounds of movement once again, and Icarium spoke in a calm, measured voice. 'It is time.'

They broke camp swiftly. Mappo was still drawing the ties of his sack when Fiddler set out, a soldier approaching a battlefield, cautious yet determined. The High Priest of Shadow bounded after him. As Icarium prepared to follow, Mappo reached out and gripped the Jhag's arm.

'My friend, Azath Houses seek to imprison all who possess power – do you fathom what you risk?'

Icarium smiled. 'Not just me, Mappo. You ever underestimate yourself, what you have become after all these centuries. We must trust in the Azath understanding that we mean no harm, if we intend to continue onward.'

The others had all set out – Apsalar sparing one searching glance their way – leaving the two alone.

'How can we trust in something we cannot understand?' the Trell demanded. 'You said "aware". How? Precisely *what* is aware?'

'I have no idea. I sense a presence, that is all. And if I can sense it, then it in turn can sense me. Tremorlor suffers, Mappo. It fights alone, and its cause is just. I mean to help the Azath, and so to Tremorlor lies the choice – to accept my help or not.'

The Trell struggled to disguise his distress. *Oh, my friend, you offer help without realizing how quickly that blade can turn. In your ignorance you are so pure, so noble. If Tremorlor knows you better than you know yourself, will it dare accept your offer?*

'What is wrong, friend?'

Bleak suspicion showed in the Jhag's eyes, and Mappo was forced to look away. *What is wrong? I would speak to warn you, my friend. Should Tremorlor take you, the world is freed of a vast threat, but I lose a friend. No, I betray you to eternal imprisonment. The Elders and the Nameless Ones who set upon me this task would command me with certainty. They would care nothing of love. Nor would the young Trell warrior who so freely made his vow hesitate – for he did not know the man he was to follow. Nor did he possess doubts. Not then, so long ago.* 'I beg you, Icarium, let us turn back now. The risk is too great, my friend.' He felt his eyes water as he

stared out across the plain. My *friend. At last, dear Elders, I am revealed to you. You chose wrongly. I am a coward.*

'I wish,' Icarium said slowly, haltingly, 'I wish I could understand. The war I see within you breaks my heart, Mappo. You must realize by now ...'

'Realize what?' the Trell croaked, still unable to meet the Jhag's eyes.

'That I would give my life for you, my only friend, my brother.'

Mappo wrapped his arms about himself. 'No,' he whispered. 'Do not say that.'

'Help me end your war. Please.'

The Trell drew a deep, ragged breath. 'The city of the First Empire, the one upon the old island ...'

Icarium waited.

'Destroyed ... by your hand, Icarium. Yours is a blind rage ... a rage unequalled. It burns fierce, so fierce all your memory of what you do is obliterated. I watch you – I have watched you stirring those cold ashes, ever seeking to discover who you are, yet there I stand, at your side, bound by a vow to prevent you ever committing such an act again. You have destroyed cities, entire peoples. Once you begin killing, you cannot stop, until all before you is . .. lifeless.'

The Jhag said nothing, nor could Mappo look at his friend. The Trell's arms ached with his own protective, helpless hug. His anguish was a storm within him, and he was holding it back with all his strength.

'And Tremorlor knows,' Icarium said, in a cold, flat voice. 'The Azath can do naught but take me.'

If it is able, and so sorely tested before the effort's even begun. In your anger you may destroy it – spirits below, what do we risk here?

'I believe this warren has shaped you, Icarium. After all this time, you have finally come home.'

'Where it began, it shall end. I go to Tremorlor.'

'Friend—'

'No. I cannot walk free with this knowledge – you must see that, Mappo. I cannot—'

'If Tremorlor takes you, you will not die, Icarium. Your imprisonment is eternal, yet you shall be ... *aware.'*

'Aye, a worthy punishment for my crimes.'

The Trell cried out at that.

Icarium's hand fell on his shoulder. 'Walk with me to my prison, Mappo. Do what you must – what you clearly have done before – to prevent my rage. I must not be allowed to resist.'

Please—

'Do what a friend would do. And free yourself, if I am to be so presumptuous as to offer you a gift in return. We must end this.'

He shook his head, seeking to deny everything. *Coward! Strike him down now! Drag him away from here – far away – he*

will return to consciousness recalling *none of this. I can lead him away, in some other direction, and we can be as we were, as we always have been—*

'Rise, please, the others await us.'

The Trell had not realized he was on the ground, curled tight. He tasted blood in his mouth.

'Rise, Mappo. One last task.'

Firm, strong hands helped him climb to his feet. He tottered as if drunk or fevered.

'Mappo, I cannot call you friend otherwise.'

'That,' the Trell gasped, 'was unfair—'

'Aye, it seems I must make you what I seem to be. Let anger be the iron of your resolve. Leave no room for doubt – you were ever too sentimental,

Trell.'

Even your attacks with words are kindly said. Ah, gods, *how can I do this?*

'The others are deeply shaken by what they have seen – what shall we tell them?'

Mappo shook his head. *Still a child in so many ways, Icarium. They know.*

'Come along now. My home awaits this prodigal return.'

'It had to come,' Fiddler said as they arrived. Mappo studied each of them in turn and saw the knowledge plainly writ, in every hue. Iskaral Pust's wizened face was twisted in a febrile grin – fear, anticipation and a host of other emotions only he could explain, had he been willing. Apsalar seemed to have set aside whatever sympathy she felt, and now eyed Icarium as if gauging a potential opponent; her uncertainty at her own ability showed for the first time. There was resignation in Rellock's eyes, all too aware of the threat to his daughter. Crokus alone seemed immune to the knowledge, and Mappo once again wondered at the certainty the young man seemed to have discovered within himself. *As if the lad admires Icarium – but what part of the Jhag does he admire?*

They stood on a hill, the roots chaotic underfoot. *Some ancient creature lies imprisoned beneath us. All these hills . . .* Ahead, the landscape changed, the roots rising in narrow ridges to create thick walls, forming corridors in a sprawling, wild maze. Some of the roots within the walls seemed to be moving. Mappo's gaze narrowed as he studied that ceaseless motion.

'Make no efforts to save me,' Icarium announced, 'should Tremorlor seek to take me. Indeed, assist those efforts in any way you can—'

'Fool!' Iskaral Pust crowed. 'The Azath needs you first! Tremorlor risks a cast of the knuckles that even Oponn would quail at! Desperation! A thousand Soletaken and D'ivers are converging! My god has done all he

can, as have I! And who will thank us? Who will acknowledge our sacrifice? You must not fail us now, horrid Jhag!'

Grimacing, Icarium turned to Mappo. 'I shall defend the Azath – tell me, can I fight without. . . without that burning rage?'

'You possess a threshold,' the Trell conceded. But *oh so near.*

'Hold yourself back,' Fiddler said, checking his crossbow. 'Until the rest of us have done all we can do.'

'Iskaral Pust,' Crokus snapped. 'That includes not just you, but your god —'

'Hah! You would command us? We have brought the players together – no more can be asked—'

The Daru closed on the High Priest, a knife-point flashing to rest lightly against Pust's neck. 'Not good enough,' he said. 'Call your god, damn you. We need more help!'

'The risks—'

'Are greater if you just stand back, dammit! *What if Icarium kills the Azath?'*

Mappo held his breath, astonished at how deeply Crokus understood the situation.

There was silence.

Icarium stepped back, shaken.

Oh yes, friend, you possess such power.

Iskaral Pust blinked, gaped, then shut his mouth with a snap. 'Unforeseen,' he finally whimpered. 'All that would be freed ... oh, my! Release me now.'

Crokus stepped back, sheathing his knife.

'Shadowthrone ... uh ... my worthy Lord of Shadow ... is thinking. Yes! Thinking furiously! Such is the vastness of his genius that he can outwit

even himself!' The High Priest's eyes widened and he spun to face the forest behind them.

A distant howl sounded from the wood.

Iskaral Pust smiled.

'I'll be damned,' Apsalar muttered. 'I didn't think he had it in him.'

Five Hounds of Shadow emerged from the wood like a loping pack of wolves, though each was as tall as a pony. To mock all things natural, the pale, sightless Hound named Blind led the way. Her mate Baran ran behind and to her right. Gear and Shan followed in rough flanking positions. The pack's leader, Rood, sauntered in their wake.

Mappo shivered. 'I thought there were seven.'

'Anomander Rake killed two on the Rhivi Plain,' Apsalar said, 'when he demanded Cotillion cease possession of my body.'

Crokus spun in surprise. 'Rake? I didn't know that.'

Mappo raised an eyebrow at the Daru. 'You know Anomander Rake, Lord of Moon's Spawn?'

'We met but once,' Crokus said.

'I would hear that tale some day.'

The lad nodded, tight-lipped.

Mappo, *you are the only fool here who believes we will survive this.* He fixed his gaze once more on the approaching Hounds. In all his travels with Icarium, they had never before crossed paths with the legendary creatures of Shadow, yet the Trell well knew their names and descriptions, and the Hound he feared most was Shan. She moved like fluid darkness, her eyes crimson slits. Where the others showed, in the scars tracked across their muscled bulk, the savage ferocity of brawlers, Shan's sleek approach was a true killer's, an assassin's. The Trell felt the hair rise on the back of his neck as those deadly eyes found and held him for the briefest of moments.

'They are not displeased,' Iskaral Pust crooned.

Mappo pulled his eyes away from the beasts and saw Fiddler staring at him. The knowledge that passed between them was instant and certain. The sapper's head tilted a fraction. The Trell sighed, slowly blinked, then turned to Icarium. 'My friend—'

'I welcome them,' the Jhag rumbled. 'We shall speak no more of it, Mappo.'

In silence the Hounds arrived, fanning out to encircle the company.

'Into the maze we go,' Iskaral Pust said, then cackled as a distant, uncanny scream reached them. The Hounds raised their heads at the sound, testing the motionless air, but seemed otherwise unexcited. There was around each beast an aura of dreadful competence, wrought with vast antiquity like threads of iron.

The High Priest of Shadow broke into another dance, brought to an abrupt halt by Baran's head and shoulder as the animal, with blurring speed, batted Iskaral Pust to the ground.

Fiddler grunted as he reached down to help the priest up. 'You've managed to irritate your god, Pust.'

'Nonsense,' the man gasped. 'Affection. The puppy was so pleased to see me it became overexcited.'

They set off towards the maze, beneath a sky the colour of polished iron.

Gesler strode to where Duiker, Bult and Captain Lull sat drinking weak herbal tea. The corporal's face was red and swollen around the fractured nose, his voice a rough whine. 'We can't pack no more aboard, so we're pulling out to catch the last of the tide.'

'How quickly can those undead oarsmen take you to Aren?' Lull asked.

'Won't be long. Three days at the most. Don't worry, we won't lose any of the wounded on the way, sir—'

'What makes you so certain of that, Corporal?'

'Things are kind of timeless on the *Silanda*, sir. All those heads still drip blood, only they ain't been attached to their bodies for months, years, maybe even decades. Nothing rots. Fener's tusk, we can't even grow beards when we're aboard, sir.'

Lull grunted.

It was an hour before dawn. The sounds of frenzied activity rising from Korbolo Dom's encampment had not ceased. Sorcerous wards prevented the Wickan warlocks from discovering the nature of that activity. The lack of knowing had stretched everyone's nerves taut.

'Fener guard you all,' Gesler said.

Duiker looked up to meet the man's eyes. 'Deliver our wounded, Corporal.'

'Aye, Historian, we'll do just that. And maybe we can even pry Nok's fleet out of the harbour, or shame Pormqual into marching. The captain of the City Garrison's a good man – Blistig – if he wasn't responsible for the protection of Aren, he'd be here by now. Anyway, maybe the two of us can put some iron into the High Fist's spine.'

'As you say,' Lull muttered. 'Get on with you now, Corporal, you're almost as ugly as me and it's turning my stomach.'

'Got more than a few spare Tiste Andii eyes if you'd like to try one out for a fitting, sir. Last chance.'

'I'll pass, Corporal, but thanks for the offer.'

'Don't mention it. Fare you well, Historian. Sorry we couldn't have done better with Kulp and Heboric.'

'You did better than anyone could have hoped for, Gesler.'

With a shrug, the man turned towards the waiting dory. Then he paused. 'Oh, Commander Bult.'

'Aye?'

'My apologies to the Fist for breaking his hand.'

'Sormo's managed to force-heal that, Corporal, but I'll pass your thoughts on.'

'You know, Commander,' Gesler said a moment before stepping into the boat, 'I just noticed – between you and the captain you got three eyes and three ears and almost a whole head of hair.'

Bult swung around to glare at the corporal. 'Your point?'

'Nothing. Just noticing, sir. See you all in Aren.'

Duiker watched the man row his way across the yellow sludge of the river. *See you all in Aren. That was feeble, Corporal Gesler, but well enough meant.*

'For the rest of my days,' Lull sighed, 'I'll know Gesler as the man who broke his nose to spite his face.'

Bult grinned, tossed the dregs of his tea onto the muddy ground and rose with a crackling of joints. 'Nephew will like that one, Captain.'

'Was it just a matter of mistrust, Uncle?' Duiker asked, looking up.

Bult stared down for a moment, then shrugged. 'Coltaine would tell you it was so, Historian.'

'But what do you think?'

'I'm too tired to think. If you are determined to know the Fist's thoughts on Korbolo Dom's offer, you might try asking him yourself.'

They watched the commander walk away.

Lull grunted. 'Can't wait to read your account of the Chain of Dogs, old man. Too bad I didn't see you send a trunk full of scrolls with Gesler.'

Duiker climbed to his feet. 'It seems nobody wants to hold hands this night.'

'Might have better luck tomorrow night.'

'Might.'

'Thought you'd found a woman. A marine – what was her name?'

'I don't know. We shared one night...'

'Ah, sword too small for the sheath, eh?'

Duiker smiled. 'We decided it would not do to repeat that night. We each have enough losses to deal with...'

'You are both fools, then.'

'I imagine we are.'

Duiker set off through the restless, sleepless encampment. He heard few conversations, yet a bleak awareness roared around him, a sound only his bones could feel.

He found Coltaine outside his command tent, conferring with Sormo, Nil and Nether. The Fist's right hand was still swollen and mottled, and his pale, sweat-beaded face revealed the trauma of forced healing.

Sormo addressed the historian. 'Where is your Corporal List?'

Duiker blinked. 'I am not sure. Why?'

'He is possessed of visions.'

'Aye, he is.'

The warlock's gaunt face twisted in a grimace. 'We sense nothing of what lies ahead. A land so emptied is unnatural, Historian. It has been scoured, its soul destroyed. How?'

'List says there was a war once, out on the plain beyond the forest. So long ago that all memory of it has vanished. Yet an echo remains, sealed in the very bedrock.'

'Who fought this war, Historian?'

'Yet to be revealed, I'm afraid. A ghost guides List in his dreams, but it will be no certain unveiling.' Duiker hesitated, then sighed. 'The ghost is

Jaghut.'

Coltaine glanced east, seemed to study the paling skyline.

'Fist,' Duiker said after a moment, 'Korbolo Dom—'

There was a commotion nearby. They turned to see a nobleman rushing towards them. The historian frowned, then recognition came. 'Tumlit—'

The old man, squinting fiercely as he scanned each face, finally came to a halt before Coltaine. 'A most dreadful occurrence, Fist,' he gasped in his tremulous voice.

Duiker only now heard a restlessness rising from the refugee encampment stretched up the trader track. 'Tumlit, what has happened?'

'Another emissary, I'm afraid. Brought through in secret. Met with the Council – I sought to dissuade them but failed, alas. Pullyk and Nethpara have swayed the others. Fist, the refugees shall cross the river, under the benign protection of Korbolo Dom—'

Coltaine spun to his warlocks. 'To your clans. Send Bult and the captains to me.'

Shouts now sounded from the Wickans in the clearing as the mass of refugees surged forward, pushing through, down to the ford. The Fist found a nearby soldier. 'Have the clan war chiefs withdraw their warriors from their path – we cannot contest this.'

He's right – we won't be able to stop the fools.

Bult and the captains arrived in a rush and Coltaine snapped out his commands. Those orders made it clear to Duiker that the Fist was preparing for the worst. As the officers raced off, Coltaine faced the historian.

'Go to the sappers. By my command they are to join the refugee train, insignia and uniforms exchanged for mundane garb—'

'That won't be necessary, Fist – they all wear assorted rags and looted gear anyway. But I'll have them tie their helms to their belts.'

'Go.'

Duiker set off. The sky was lightening, and with that burgeoning glow the butterflies stirred on all sides, a silent shimmering that sent shivers through the historian for no obvious reason. He worked his way up the seething train, skirting one edge and pushing through the ranks of infantry who were standing back and watching the refugees without expression.

He spied a ragtag knot of soldiers seated well back from the trail, almost at the edge of the flanking picket line. The company ignored the refugees and seemed busy with the task of coiling ropes. A few glanced up as Duiker arrived.

'Coltaine commands you join the refugees,' the historian said. 'No arguments – take off your helms, now—'

'Who's arguing?' one squat, wide soldier muttered.

'What are you planning with the ropes?' Duiker demanded.

The sapper looked up, his eyes narrow slashes in his wide, battered face. 'We did some reconnoitring of our own, old man. Now if you'd shut up we can get ready, right?'

Three soldiers appeared from the forest side, approaching at a jog. One carried a severed head by its braid, trailing threads of blood. 'This one's done his last nod at post,' the man commented, dropping his prize to thud and roll on the ground. No-one else took notice, nor did the three sappers report to anyone.

The entire company seemed to complete their preparations all at once, ropes around one shoulder, helms strapped to belts, crossbows readied, then hidden beneath loose raincapes and telaban. In silence they rose and began making their way towards the mass of refugees.

Duiker hesitated. He turned to look down at the crossing. The head of the refugee column had pushed out into the ford, which was proving waist-deep, at least forty paces wide, its bottom thick, cloying mud. Butterflies swarmed above the mass of humanity in sunlit explosions of pallid yellow. A dozen Wickan horsewarriors had been sent ahead to guide the column. Behind them came the wagons of the noble blood – the only refugees

staying dry and above the chaotic tumult. The historian glanced over at the surging train where the sappers had gone but they were nowhere to be seen, swallowed up in the crowds. From somewhere farther up the trader track came the terrible lowing of cattle being slaughtered.

The flanking infantry were readying weapons – Coltaine was clearly anticipating a rearguard defence of the landing.

Still the historian hesitated. If he joined the refugees and the worst came to pass, the ensuing panic would be as deadly as any slaughter visited upon them by Korbolo Dom's forces. *Hood's breath! We are now truly at that bastard's mercy.*

A hand closed on his arm and he spun around to see his nameless marine at his side.

'Come on,' she said. 'Into the mob – we're to support the sappers.'

'In what? Nothing has befallen the refugees yet – and they're near to halfway across—'

'Aye, and look at the heads turning to look downstream. The rebels have made a floating bridge – no, you can't see it from here, but it's there, packed with pikemen—'

'Pikemen? Doing what?'

'Watching. Waiting. Come on, lover, the nightmare's about to begin.'

They joined the mass of refugees, entered that human current as it poured down towards the landing. A sudden roar and muted clash of weapons announced that the rearguard had been struck. The tide's momentum increased. Packed within that jostling chaos, Duiker could see little to either side or behind – but the slope ahead was revealed, as was the River Vathar itself, which they seemed to be sweeping towards with the swiftness of an avalanche. The entire ford was packed with refugees. Along the edges people were being pushed into deeper water – Duiker saw bobbing heads and arms struggling in the sludge, the current dragging them ever closer to the pikemen on the bridge.

A great cry of dismay rose from those on the river, faces now turning upstream to something the historian could not yet see.

The dozen horsewarriors gained the clearing on the opposite bank. He watched them frantically nocking arrows as they turned towards the line of trees farther up the bank. Then the Wickans were reeling, toppling from their mounts, feathered shafts jutting from their bodies. Horses screamed and went down.

The nobles' wagons clacked and clattered ashore, then stopped as the oxen pulling them sank down beneath a swarm of arrows.

The ford was blocked.

Panic now gripped the refugees, descending in a human wave down to the landing. Bellowing, Duiker was helpless as he was carried along into the yellow-smeared water. He caught a glimpse of what approached from upstream – another floating bridge, packed with pikemen and archers. Crews on both banks gripped ropes, guiding the bridge as the current drew it ever closer to the ford.

Arrows ripped through the clouds of whirling butterflies, descended on the mass of refugees. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to go.

The historian found himself within a nightmare. All around him, unarmoured civilians died in that ghastly whisper and clatter. The mob surged in every direction now, caught in terrified, helpless eddies. Children vanished underfoot, trampled down into the turbid water.

A woman fell back against Duiker. He wrapped his arms around her in an effort to keep her upright, then saw the arrow that had driven through the babe in her arms, then into her chest. He cried out in horror.

The marine appeared at his side, thrusting a reach of rope into his hands. 'Grab this!' she shouted. 'Hold on tight – we're through – don't let go!'

He twisted the rope around his wrists. Ahead of the marine, the strand stretched on, between the heaving bodies and out of sight. He felt it tighten, was pulled forward.

Arrows rained down ceaselessly. One grazed the historian's cheek, another bounced from the leather-sheathed chain protecting his shoulder. He wished to every god that he had donned his helm instead of tying it at his belt – from which it had long since been torn free and lost.

The pressure on the rope was steady, relentless, dragging him through the mob, over people and under them. More than once he was pulled down under the water, only to rise again half a dozen paces later, choking and coughing. At one point, as he went over the top of the seething press, he caught the flash of sorcery from somewhere ahead, a thundering wave, then he was yanked back down, twisting his shoulder to slide roughly between two screaming civilians.

The journey seemed unending, battering him with surreal glimpses until he was numb, feeling like a wraith being pulled through the whole of human history, an endless procession of pain, suffering and ignoble death. Fate's cast of chance was iron-barbed, sky-sent, or the oblivion of all that waited below. *There is no escape – another lesson of history. Mortality is a visitor never gone for long—*

Then he was being dragged over wet, muddy corpses and blood-slicked clay. The arrows no longer descended from the sky but sped low over the ground, striking wood and flesh on all sides. Duiker rolled through a deep, twisting rut, then came up against the spoked wheel of a wagon.

'Let go the rope!' the marine commanded. 'We're here, Duiker—' Here.

He wiped the mud from his eyes, staying low as he looked around for the first time. Wickan horsewarriors, sappers and marines lay amidst dead and dying mounts, all so studded with arrows that the entire landing looked like a reed bed. The nobles' wagons had been cleared from the end of the ford and arrayed in a defensive crescent, although the fighting had pushed beyond them into the forest itself.

'Who?' Duiker gasped.

The woman lying beside him grunted. 'Just what's left of the sappers, the marines ... and a few surviving Wickans.'

"That's it?'

'Can't get anyone else across – and besides, the Seventh and at least two of the clans are fighting in the rearguard. We're on our own, Duiker, and if we can't clear these woods...'

We will be annihilated.

She reached out to a nearby corpse, dragging it closer to remove the dead Wickan's helm. 'This one looks more your size than mine, old man. Here.'

'What are we fighting out there?'

'At least three companies. Mostly archers, though – I think Korbolo wasn't expecting any soldiers at the front of the column. The plan was to use the refugees to block our deployment and stop us from gaining this bank.'

'As if Korbolo knew Coltaine would reject the offer, but the nobles wouldn't.'

'Aye. The arrow fire's tailed off – those sappers are pushing them back – gods, they're mayhem! Let's find us some useful weapons and go join the fun.'

'Go ahead,' Duiker said. 'But here I stay – within sight of the river. I need to see ...'

'You'll get yourself skewered, old man.'

'I'll risk it. Get going!'

She hesitated, then nodded and crawled off among the bodies.

The historian found a round shield and clambered up on the nearest wagon, where he almost stepped on a cowering figure. He stared down at the trembling man. 'Nethpara.'

'Save me, please!'

Ignoring the noble-born, Duiker turned his attention back to the river.

The stream of refugees who reached the south bank could not go forward; they began spreading out along the shoreline. Duiker saw a mob of them

discover the rope crew for the upstream bridge, and descend on them with a ferocity that disregarded their lack of armour and weapons. The crew were literally torn apart.

The slaughter had turned the river downstream into a pink mass of stained insects and bodies, and still the numbers grew. Another flaw in Korbolo's plan was revealed as the flights of arrows from the upstream bridge dwindled – the archers had already spent their supply. The floating platform upstream had been allowed to drift, closing the gap until the pikemen finally came into contact with the unarmed civilians on the ford. But they had not accounted for the roaring rage that met them. The refugees had been pushed past fear. Hands were slashed as they closed on the pikeheads, but they would not let go. Others clambered forward in a rush to get to the archers behind the wavering line of pikemen. The bridge sagged beneath the weight, then tilted. A moment later the river was solid with flailing, struggling figures – refugees and Korbolo's companies both – as the bridge tipped and broke apart.

And over it all, the butterflies swarmed, like a million yellow-petalled flowers dancing on swirling winds.

Another wave of sorcery erupted, and Duiker's head turned at the sound. He saw Sormo, out in the centre of the mass, astride his horse. The power that rolled from him tumbled towards the bridge downstream, striking the rebel soldiers with sparks that scythed like barbed wire. Blood sprayed into the air, and above the bridge the butterflies went from yellow to red and the stained clouds fell in a fluttering blanket.

But as Duiker watched, four arrows struck the warlock, one driving through his neck. Sormo's horse whipped its head around, screaming at the half-dozen arrows embedded in it. The animal staggered, slewing sideways to the edge of the shallows, then into deep water. Sormo reeled, then slowly slid from the saddle, vanishing beneath the sludge. The horse collapsed on top of him.

Duiker could not draw breath. Then he saw a thin, lean arm thrust skyward a dozen yards downstream.

Butterflies mobbed that straining, yearning reach, even as it slowly sank back down, then disappeared. The insects were converging, thousands, then hundreds of thousands. On all sides it seemed that the battle, the slaughter, paused and watched.

Hood's breath, they've come for him. For his soul. Not crows, not as it should be. Gods below!

A quavering voice rose from beneath the historian. 'What has happened? Have we won?'

The breath that Duiker pulled into his lungs was ragged. The mass of butterflies was a seething, frenzied mound on the spot where Sormo had appeared, a mound as high as a barrow and swelling with every moment that passed, with every staggering beat of the historian's heart.

'Have we won? Can you see Coltaine? Call him here – I would speak to him—'

The moment when all stood still and silent was broken as a thick flight of Wickan arrows struck the soldiers on the downstream bridge. What Sormo had begun, his clan kin completed: the last of the archers and pikemen went down.

Duiker saw three squares of infantry dog-trot down the north slope, pulled from the rearguard action to enforce order on the crossing. Wickan horsewarriors of the Weasel Clan rode out from the flanking woods, voicing their ululating victory cries.

Duiker swung about. He saw Malazan soldiers backing away from cover to cover – a handful of marines and less than thirty sappers. The arrow fire was intensifying, getting closer. *Gods, they've already done the impossible – do not demand more of them—*

The historian drew a breath, then climbed up onto the wagon's high bench. 'Everyone!' he shouted to the milling refugees crowding the bank. 'Every able hand! Find a weapon – to the forest, else the slaughter begins again! The archers are retur—'

He got no further, as the air shook with a savage, bestial roar. Duiker stared down, watching hundreds of civilians rush forward, caring nothing for weapons, intent only on closing with the companies of archers, on answering the day's carnage with a vengeance no less terrible.

We are all gripped in madness. I have never seen the like nor heard of such a thing – gods, what we have become . . .

The waves of refugees swept over the Malazan positions and, unwavering before frantic, devastating flights of arrows from the treeline, plunged into the forest. Shrieks and screams echoed eerily in the air.

Nethpara clambered into view. 'Where is Coltaine? I demand—'

Duiker reached down one-handed and gripped the silk scarf wound around the nobleman's neck. He dragged Nethpara closer. The man squealed, scratching uselessly at the historian's hand.

'Nethpara. He could have let you go. Let you cross. Alone. Under the shelter of Korbolo Dom's glorious *mercy.* How many have died this day? How many of these soldiers, how many Wickans, have given their lives to protect your hide?'

'L-let go of me, you foul slave-spawn!'

A red mist blossomed before Duiker's eyes. He took the nobleman's flabby neck in both hands and began squeezing. He watched Nethpara's eyes bulge.

Someone battered at his head. Someone yanked at his wrists. Someone wrapped a forearm around his own neck and flexed iron-hard muscles across the throat. The mist dimmed, as if night was falling. The historian watched as hands pried his own from Nethpara's neck, watched as the man fell away, gasping.

Then dark's descent was done.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

One who was many
On the blood trail
Came hunting his own voice
Savage murder
Sprites buzzing in the sun
Came hunting his own voice
But Hood's music is all
He heard, the siren song
Called silence.

Seglora's Account
Seglora

The captain had begun swaying, though not in time with the heaving ship. He poured wine all over the table as well as into the four goblets arrayed before him. 'Ordering thick-skulled sailors this way and that makes for a considerable thirst. I expect the food will be along shortly.'

Pormqual's treasurer, who did not consider the company worthy of knowing his name, raised painted eyebrows. 'But, Captain, we have already eaten.'

'Have we? That explains the mess, then, though the mess still has some explaining to do, because it must have been awful. You there,' he said to Kalam, 'you're as solid as any Fenn bear, was that palatable? Never mind, what would you know, anyway? I hear Seven Cities natives grow fruit just so they can eat the larvae in them. Gobble the worm and toss the apple, hey? If you want to know how you folk see the world, it's all there in that one custom. Now that we're all chums, what were we talking about?'

Salk Elan reached out and collected his goblet, sniffing cautiously before taking a swallow. 'The dear treasurer was surprising us with a complaint,

Captain.'

'Was he now?' The captain leaned over the small table to stare at the treasurer. 'A complaint? Aboard my ship? You bring those to me, sir.'

'I just have,' the man replied, sneering.

'And deal with it I shall, as a captain must.' He leaned back with an air of satisfaction. 'Now, what else should we talk about?'

Salk Elan met Kalam's eye, winked. 'What if we were to touch on the small matter of those two privateers presently pursuing us?'

'They're not pursuing,' the captain said. He drained his goblet, smacked his lips, then refilled it from the webbed jug. 'They are keeping pace, sir, and that is entirely different, as you must surely grasp.'

'Well, I admit, *I* see the distinction less clearly than you do, Captain.'

'How unfortunate.'

'You might,' the treasurer rasped, 'endeavour to enlighten us.'

'What did you say? Lightendeavourus? Extraordinary, man!' He settled back in his seat, a contented expression on his face.

'They want a stronger wind,' Kalam ventured.

'Quickening,' the captain said. 'They want to dance around us, aye, the ale-pissing cowards. Toe to toe, that's how I'd like it, but no, they'd rather duck and dodge.' He swung surprisingly steady eyes on Kalam. 'That's why we'll take them unawares, come the dawn. Attack! Hard about! Marines prepare to board enemy vessel! I won't truck complaints aboard *Ragstopper.* Not a one, dammit. The next bleat I hear and the bleater loses a finger. Bleats again, loses another one. And so on. Each one nailed to the deck. Tap tap!'

Kalam closed his eyes. They had sailed four days now without an escort, the tradewinds pushing them along at a steady six knots. The sailors had run up every sheet of canvas they possessed and the ship sang a chorus of

ominous creaks and groans, but the two pirate galleys could still sail circles around Ragstopper.

And *the madman wants to attack.*

'Did you say attack?' the treasurer whispered, his eyes wide. 'I forbid it!'

The captain blinked owlishly at the man. 'Why, sir,' he said in a calm voice, 'I looked into my tin mirror, did I not? It's lost its polish, on my word so it has. Between yesterday and today. I plan to take advantage of that.'

Since the voyage began, Kalam had managed to stay in his cabin for the most part, electing to emerge on deck only at the quietest hour, late in the last watch before dawn. Eating with the crew in the galley had also reduced the number of encounters with either Salk Elan or the treasurer. This night, however, the captain had insisted on his joining them at dinner. The appearance of the pirates at midday had made the assassin curious about how the captain would deal with the threat, so he had agreed.

It was clear that Salk Elan and the treasurer had established a truce of sorts as things never went beyond the occasional sardonic swipe. The exaggerated airs of civil discourse made their efforts at self-control obvious.

But it was the captain who was the true mystery aboard the Ragstopper. Kalam had heard enough talk in the galley and between the First and Second Mates to gauge that the man was viewed with both respect and some kind of twisted affection. In *the manner that you'd view a touchy dog. Pat once and the tail wags, pat twice and lose a hand.* He shifted roles with random alacrity, dismissive of propriety. He revealed a sense of humour that yanked taut comprehension. Too long in his company – especially when wine was the drink of choice – and the assassin's head ached with the effort of following the captain's wending ways. What was worse, Kalam sensed a thread of cool purpose within the scattered weave, as if the captain spoke two languages at once, one robust and divergent, the other silken with secrets. I*'d swear the bastard's trying to tell me something. Something vital.* He'd heard of a certain sorcery, from one of the less common warrens, that could lay a glamour upon a person's mind, a kind of mental block that the victim – in absolute, tortured awareness – could circle round but never

manage to penetrate. All, *now I'm venturing into the absurd. Paranoia's the assassin's bedmate, and no rest comes in that clamouring serpent's nest. Would that I could speak with Quick Ben now—*

'—sleep with your eyes open, man?'

Kalam started, frowned at the captain.

'The master of this fine sailing ship was saying,' Salk Elan purred, 'that it's been a strange passing of days since we reached open water. It was an interrogative seeking your opinion, Kalam.'

'It's been four days since we left Aren Bay,' the assassin growled.

'Has it now?' the captain asked. 'Are you certain?'

'What do you mean?'

'Someone keeps knocking over the hisser, you see.'

'The what?' *Oh, the hissing of sand – I'd swear he's making up words as he goes along.* 'Are you suggesting you have but one hourglass on *Ragstopper?'*

'Official time is so kept by a single glass,' Elan said.

'While none of the others on board agree,' the captain added, filling his goblet yet again. 'Four days ... or fourteen?'

'Is this some kind of philosophic debate?' the treasurer demanded suspiciously.

'Hardly,' the captain managed to say during a belch. 'We left harbour with the first night of a quarter moon.'

Kalam tried to think back to the previous night. He'd stood on the forecastle, beneath a brilliantly clear sky. Had the moon already set? No, it rode the horizon, directly beneath the tip of the constellation known as the Dagger. *End of a three-quarter moon. But that's impossible.*

'Ten weevils a handful,' the captain went on. 'As good as a hisser in gauging passage. You'd have ten in close on a fortnight, unless the flour was

foul from the start, only the cook swears otherwise—'

'Just as he'd swear he'd cooked us dinner here tonight,' Salk Elan said with a smile, 'though our bellies groan that what we've just eaten was anything but food. In any case, thank you for dispelling the confusion.'

'Well, sir, you've a point there, sharp enough to prick skin, though mine's thicker than most and I ain't anything if not stubborn.'

'For which I cannot help but admire you, Captain.'

What in Hood's name are these two talking about, or, rather, not talking about?

'A man gets so he can't even trust the beat of his own heart – mind you, I can't count past fourteen in any case, so's I could not help but lose track and tracking's what we're talking about here if I'm not mistaken.'

'Captain,' the treasurer said, 'you cause me great distress with your words.'

Salk Elan commented, 'You're not alone in that.'

'Do I offend you, sir?' The captain's face had reddened as he glared at the treasurer.

'Offend? No. Baffle. I dare say I am led to conclude that you have lost the grip on your own mind. Thus, to ensure the safety of this ship, I have no choice—'

'No choice?' the captain erupted, rising from his seat. 'Words and grips like sand. What slips through your fingers can knock you over! I'll show you safety, you sweaty stream of lard!'

Kalam leaned back clear of the table as the captain went to the cabin door and began struggling with his cloak. Salk Elan had not moved from his seat, watching with a tight smile.

A moment later the captain flung open the cabin door and barrelled into the passageway, bellowing a call for his First Mate. His boots thumped like fists hammering a wall as he made for the galley.

The cabin's door creaked back and forth on its hinges.

The treasurer's mouth opened and closed, then opened again. 'What choice?' he whispered to no-one in particular.

'Not yours to make,' Elan drawled.

The noble swung to him. 'Not mine? And who else, if not the man entrusted with the Aren treasury—'

'Is that what it's officially called, then? How about Pormqual's ill-gotten loot? Those seals on the crates below have the High Fist's sigil on them, not the Imperial sceptre—'

And so you have been in the hold, Salk Elan? Interesting.

'To lay hands upon those crates is punishable by death,' the treasurer hissed.

Elan sneered his disgust. 'You're doing the dirty work of a thief, so what does that make you?'

The noble went white. In silence he rose and, using his hands to steady himself as the ship pitched, made his way across the small room, then out into the passageway.

Salk Elan glanced at Kalam. 'So, my reluctant friend, what do you make of this captain of ours?'

'Nothing I'd share with you,' Kalam rumbled.

'Your constant efforts to avoid me have been childish.'

'Well, it's either that or I kill you outright.'

'How unpleasant of you, Kalam, after all the efforts I have made on your behalf.'

The assassin rose. 'Rest assured I'll repay the debt, Salk Elan.'

'You could do that with your company alone – intelligent conversation aboard this ship is proving hard to come by.'

'I'll spare a thought in sympathy,' Kalam said, heading to the cabin door.

'You wrong me, Kalam. I am not your enemy. Indeed, we two are much alike.'

The assassin paused in the portalway. 'If you're seeking friendship between us, Salk Elan, you've just taken a long step back with that observation.' He stepped out into the passage and made his way forward.

He emerged onto the main deck and found himself in the midst of furious activity. Gear was being battened down, sailors checking the rigging and others taking in sail. It was past the tenth bell and the night sky was solid clouds, not a star showing.

The captain reeled down to Kalam's side. 'What did I tell you? Lost its polish!'

A squall was coming – the assassin could feel it in the wind that now swirled as if the air had nowhere to go.

'From the south,' the captain laughed, clapping Kalam on the shoulder. 'We'll turn on the hunters, aye, won't we just! Storm-jibbed and marines crowding the forecastle, we'll ram 'em down their throats! Hood take these smirking stalkers – we'll see how long their grins last with a short sword jabbing 'em in the face, hey?' He leaned close, the wine sour on his breath. 'Look to your daggers, man, it'll be a night for close work, aye, won't it just.' His face spasmed suddenly and he jerked away, began screaming at his crew.

The assassin stared after him. Perhaps I'm *not being paranoid, after all. The man's afflicted with something.*

The deck heeled as they came hard about. The storm's wind arrived at the same time, lifting *Ragstopper* to run before it on stiff, shortened sails. Lanterns shuttered and the crew settling into their tasks, they plunged on, northward.

A sea battle in a raging storm, and the captain expects the marines to board the enemy craft, to stand on a pitching, wave-whipped deck and take the fight to the pirates. This is beyond audacious.

Two large figures appeared from behind, flanking the assassin. Kalam grimaced. Both of the treasurer's bodyguards had been incapacitated by seasickness since the first day, and neither looked in any condition to be able to do anything except puke his guts out on the assassin's boots, yet they stood their ground, hands on weapons.

'Master wishes to speak with you,' one of them growled.

'Too bad,' Kalam growled back.

'Now.'

'Or what, you kill me with your breath? Master can speak with corpses, can he?'

'Master commands—'

'If he wants to talk, he can come here. Otherwise, like I said, too bad.'

The two tribesmen retreated.

Kalam moved forward, past the main mast, to where the two squads of marines crouched low before the forecastle. The assassin had weathered more than his share of squalls while serving in the Imperial campaigns, in galleys, transports and triremes, on three oceans and half a dozen seas. This storm was – thus far at least – comparatively tame. The marines were grim-faced, as would be expected before an engagement, but otherwise laconic as they readied their assault crossbows in the blunted glow of a shuttered lantern.

Kalam's gaze searched among them until he found the lieutenant. 'A word with you, sir—'

'Not now,' she snapped, donning her helmet and locking the cheek-guards in place. 'Get below.'

'He means to ram—'

'I know what he means to do. And when the crunch comes, the last thing we need is some Hood-damned civilian to watch out for.'

'Do you take the captain's orders ... or the treasurer's?'

She looked up at that, eyes narrowing. The other marines paused. 'Get below,' she said.

Kalam sighed. 'I'm an Imperial veteran, Lieutenant—'

'Which army?'

He hesitated, then said, 'Second. Ninth Squad, Bridgeburners.'

As one, the marines sat back. All eyes were on him now.

The lieutenant scowled. 'Now how likely is that?'

Another marine, a grizzled veteran, barked out, 'Your sergeant? Let's hear some names, stranger.'

'Whiskeyjack. Other sergeants? Not many left. Antsy. Tormin.'

'You're Corporal Kalam, ain't you?'

The assassin studied the man. 'Who are you?'

'Nobody, sir, and been that way a long time.' He turned to his lieutenant and nodded.

'Can we count on you?' she asked Kalam.

'Not up front, but I'll be close by.'

She looked around. 'The treasurer's got an Imperial Writ – we're shackled to it, Corporal.'

'I don't think the treasurer trusts you, should it come down to making a choice between him and the captain.'

She made a face, as if tasting something bad. 'This attack's madness, but it's sharp madness.'

Kalam nodded, waited.

'I guess the treasurer's got reason.'

'If it comes to it,' the assassin said, 'leave the bodyguards to me.' 'Both of them?'

'Aye.'

The veteran spoke up. 'If we make the sharks sick in the gut with the treasurer, we'll hang for it.'

'Just be somewhere else when it happens – all of you.'

The lieutenant grinned. 'I think we can manage that.'

'Now,' Kalam said, loud enough to be heard by every marine, 'I'm just another one of those grease-faced civilians, right?'

'We never figured this outlawing stuff was for real,' a voice called out. 'Not Dujek Onearm. No way.'

Hood, for all I know you may be right, soldier. But he hid his uncertainty with a half-salute before making his way back down the length of the deck.

Ragstopper reminded Kalam of a bear crashing through thickets as it barrelled along – lumbering, broad and solid in the spraying high seas – *a spring bear, an hour out of the den, eyes red-rimmed with old sleep, miserable and gnawed with hunger deep in its belly. Somewhere ahead, two wolves slinking through the dark . . . they're in for a surprise . . .*

The captain was on the sterncastle, braced against the hand manning the tiller. His First Mate stood near him, one arm looped around the stern mast. Both were glaring ahead into the darkness, awaiting the first sighting of their quarry.

Kalam opened his mouth to speak, but a shout from the First Mate stopped him.

'A point to port, Captain! Beating three-quarters! Hood's breath, we're right on top of her!'

The pirate vessel, a low, single-masted raider barely visible in the gloom, was less than a hundred paces away, on a tack that would cut directly in front of *Ragstopper.* The positioning was breathtakingly perfect.

'All hands,' the captain bellowed through the howl of the storm, 'prepare to ram!'

The First Mate bolted ahead, shouting orders to his crew. Kalam saw the marines crouch low to the deck, readying for the impact. Faint screams reached the assassin from the pirate vessel. The taut square sail, storm-jibbed, billowed suddenly, the ship's prow pitching away as the pirate crew made a last, doomed effort to avoid the collision.

The gods were grinning down on the scene, but it was the rictus of a death's head. A swell lifted *Ragstopper* high just before the contact, then dropped the trader down onto the raider's low gunnels, just behind the peaked prow. Wood exploded, splintered and shuddered. Kalam was thrown forward, losing his grip on the starboard stern rail. He pitched from the sterncastle, struck the main deck with a tucked shoulder, rolling as the momentum carried him forward.

Masts snapped somewhere above him, sails whipping like ghost wings in the rain-tracked air.

Ragstopper settled, grinding, popping, canting heavily. Sailors were screaming, shrieking on all sides, but Kalam could see little of what was happening from where he lay. Groaning, he worked his way upright.

The last of the marines were plunging over the forward port rail, down and out of sight – presumably onto the raider's deck. Or *what's left of it.* The clash of weapons rose muted beneath the wailing wind.

The assassin turned, but the captain was nowhere in sight. Nor was there anyone at the tiller. The wreckage of a snapped spar cluttered the sterncastle.

Kalam made his way aft.

The locked ships had no steerage. Waves were pummelling *Ragstopper's* starboard hull, flinging sheets of foaming water across the main deck. A body lay in that wash, face down and leaking blood that stretched weblike in the rolling water.

Reaching the man, Kalam turned him over. It was the First Mate, his forehead sharply caved in. The blood was coming from nose and throat; the water had washed clean the killing blow, and the assassin stared at the

damage for half a dozen heartbeats before rising and stepping over the corpse.

Not so seasick after all.

He climbed to the sterncastle and began searching through the wreckage. The man at the tiller had lost most of his head, only a few twisted ropes of flesh and skin holding what was left of it to the body. He examined the slash across the neck. *Two-handed, a step behind and to the left. The spar crushed what was already dead.*

He found the captain and one of the treasurer's bodyguards beneath the sail. Splinters of wood jutted from the giant tribesman's chest and throat. He still gripped his two-handed tulwar. The captain's hands were shredded ribbons closed on the blade-end, blood pulsing from them to stain the swirling wash of seawater. A massive discolouring reached the span of the man's brow, but his breathing was steady.

Kalam pried the captain's fingers from the tulwar blade and dragged him free of the wreckage.

Ragstopper loosed its grip on the raider at the same time, dropping down into a trough, then pitching wildly as waves battered its hull. Figures appeared on the sterncastle, one taking the tiller, another crouching down beside the assassin.

Glancing up, Kalam found himself looking into Salk Elan's dripping face.

'He lives?'

'Aye.'

'We're not out of trouble yet,' Elan said.

'To Hood with that! We've got to get this man below.'

'We've sprung leaks up front – most of the marines are at the pumps.'

They lifted the captain between them. 'And the raider?'

'The one we hit? In pieces.'

'In other words,' the assassin said as they manhandled the captain down the slippery steps, 'not what the treasurer planned.'

Salk Elan stopped, his eyes sharpening. 'Seems we've slunk on the same path, you and I.'

'Where is the bastard?'

'He's taken command ... for now. Seems every officer's suffered an unlikely accident – anyway, we've got the other vessel closing on us, so, like I said, the fun's anything but over.'

'One thing at a time,' Kalam grunted.

They made their way down through the galley and into the passage. Water swirled ankle-deep, and the assassin could feel just how sluggish *Ragstopper* had become.

'You pulled rank on the marines, didn't you?' Elan asked as they reached the captain's door.

'I don't outrank the lieutenant.'

'Even so. Call it the power of notoriety, then – she's already had harsh words with the treasurer.'

'Why?'

'The bastard wants us to surrender, of course.'

They carried the captain to his cot. 'A transfer of cargo in this blow?'

'No, they'll wait it out.'

'Then we got time enough. Here, help me get him undressed.'

'His hands are bad.'

'Aye, we'll bandage them up next.'

Salk Elan stared down at the captain as the assassin pulled the blanket up around the man. 'Think he'll live?'

Kalam said nothing, pulling the captain's hands free to study the lacerations. 'He stopped a blow with these.'

'Now that's not an easy thing to do. Listen, Kalam, how are we in this?'

The assassin hesitated, then said, 'How did you put it? "Slunk the same path?" It seems neither one of us wants to end up in a shark's belly.'

'Meaning we'd better work together.'

'Aye, for now. Just don't expect me to kiss you good night, Elan.'

'Not even once?'

'You'd better get up top, find out what's going on. I can finish here.'

'Don't tarry, Kalam. Blood could spill fast.'

'Aye.'

Alone with the captain, the assassin found a sewing kit and began stitching flesh. He finished one hand and had started on the other when the captain groaned.

'Hood's breath,' Kalam muttered. 'Just another ten minutes, that's all I needed.'

'Doublecross,' the captain whispered, his eyes squeezed shut.

'We'd guessed as much,' the assassin said, continuing closing wounds. 'Now shut up and let me work.'

'Poor Pormqual's treasurer is crooked.'

'Like attracts like, as the saying goes.'

'You and that poncy skulker ... two of a kind.'

'Thanks. So I keep hearing.'

'Up to you two, now.'

'And the lieutenant.'

The captain managed a smile, his eyes still closed. 'Good.'

Kalam sat back, reached for the bandages. 'Almost done.'

'Me too.'

'That bodyguard's dead, you'll be pleased to know.'

'Aye. Killed himself, the idiot. I ducked the first swing. The blade bit through the wrong ropes. Feel that, Kalam? We're rolling even – someone up top knows what we're doing, thank the gods. Still, way too heavy ... but she'll hold together.'

'Got enough rags for that, then.'

'That we have.'

'All right, I'm done,' Kalam said, rising. 'Get some sleep, Captain. We need you hale. And fast.'

'Not likely. That other bodyguard will finish it first chance he gets. The treasurer needs me out of the way.'

'We'll take care of it, Captain.'

'Just like that?'

'Just like that.'

Closing the door behind him, Kalam paused, loosened the long-knife in its scabbard. *Just like that, Captain.*

The squall was spent, and the sky to the east was brightening, clean and gold. *Ragstopper* had come around as the tradewind returned. The mess on the sterncastle had been cleared away and the crew looked to have things in hand, although Kalam could see their tension.

The treasurer and his remaining bodyguard stood near the mainmast, the former staring steadily at the raider keeping pace to starboard, close enough to see figures on its deck, watching them in turn. The bodyguard's attention, however, was on Salk Elan, lounging near the forecastle steps. None of the crew seemed willing to cut across the ten paces separating the two men.

Kalam made his way to the treasurer's side. 'You have taken command, then?'

The man nodded sharply, his diffidence obvious as he avoided the assassin's eye. 'I intend to buy our way clear—'

'Take your cut, you mean. And how much would that be? Eighty, ninety per cent? With you along as hostage, of course.' He watched the blood leave the man's face.

'This is not your concern,' the treasurer said.

'You're right. But killing the captain and his officers is, because it jeopardizes this voyage. If the crew doesn't know for certain, you can rest assured it suspects.'

'We have the marines to deal with that. Back away and you'll survive intact. Step in and you'll be cut down.'

'Kalam studied the raider. 'And what's their percentage? What's to stop them from slitting your throat and sailing off with the whole share?'

The treasurer smiled. 'I doubt my uncle and cousins would do that. Now, I suggest you go below – back to your cabin – and stay there.'

Ignoring that advice, Kalam went off to find the marines.

The engagement with the pirates had been fierce and short. Not only was the ship coming apart under them, but there was little fight left in the raider's panicked crew.

'More like a slaughter,' the lieutenant muttered as the assassin crouched down opposite her. The two squads sat in the forward hold, amidst streams of water running down the planks, busy stuffing rags into the breaches in the hull. 'We didn't even take a scratch.'

'What have you worked out thus far?' Kalam quietly asked.

She shrugged. 'As much as we need to, Corporal. What do you want us to do?'

'The treasurer will order you to stand down. The pirates will then relieve you of your weapons—'

'At which point they slit our throats and toss us overside – Imperial Writ or no, the man's committing treason.'

'Well, he's stealing from a thief, but I take your point.' Kalam rose. 'I'll talk with the crew and get back to you, Lieutenant.'

'Why don't we take down the treasurer and his bodyguard right now, Kalam?'

The assassin's eyes narrowed. 'Stick to the rules, Lieutenant. Leave murder to those whose souls are already stained.'

She bit her lip, studied him for a long time, then slowly nodded.

Kalam found the sailor he'd spoken with when the hold was being loaded at the Aren pier. The man was coiling ropes on the sterncastle with the air of someone needing to keep busy.

'Heard you saved the captain,' the sailor said.

'He's alive, but in bad shape.'

'Aye. Cook's standing outside his cabin door, sir. Wi' a cleaver and – ask any hog – the man can use it. Bern's blessing, I seen the man shave wi' it once, as clean as a virgin's tit.'

'Who is standing in for the officers?'

'If y' mean who's got things shipshape and all the hands at stations, that'd be me, sir, only our new commander ain't much interested in jawing wi' me. His swordsman's come over to tell me t' get ready to heave to, once the seas have settled some.'

'To transfer cargo.'

The man nodded.

'And then?'

'Well now, if the commander's true to his word, they'll let us go.'

Kalam grunted. 'And why would they be so kind?'

'Aye, I've been chewin' that one myself. We got sharp enough eyes – too sharp for them to breathe easy. Besides, there's what's been done to Captain. Got us a little peeved, that has.'

Boots thumped midships and the two men turned to see the bodyguard lead the marines onto the main deck. The lieutenant was looking none too happy.

'It's the gods' puke all round us now, sir,' the sailor muttered. 'Raider's closing.'

'So we've arrived,' Kalam said under his breath. He looked across to Salk Elan and found the man's eyes on him. The assassin gave a nod and Elan casually turned away, his hands hidden beneath his cloak.

'That raider's got a shipload of swords, sir. I make fifty or more, all gettin' ready.'

'Leave them to the marines. Your crew stays back – spread the word.'

The sailor moved off.

Kalam made his way to the main deck. The treasurer was facing off with the lieutenant.

'I said to surrender your weapons, Lieutenant!' the treasurer snapped.

'No, sir. We will not.'

The treasurer was trembling with rage. He gestured to his bodyguard.

The big tribesman did not get very far. He made a choking sound, hands reaching up to claw at the knife protruding from his throat. Then he fell to his knees, toppled.

Salk Elan stepped forward. 'Change of plans, my dear sir,' he said, bending to retrieve his knife.

The assassin moved behind the treasurer and pushed the point of his long-knife against the man's lower back. 'Not a word,' he growled, 'not a move.' He then turned to the marines. 'Lieutenant, prepare to repel boarders.'

'Aye, sir.'

The raider was coming alongside, the pirates jostling as they prepared to leap the distance between the ships. The difference in height meant that they had a climb to make – nor could those on deck see much of what awaited them on *Ragstopper. A* lone crewman on the raider had begun a lazy climb towards the lone mast's tiny crow's nest.

Too *late, you fools.*

The pirate captain – the treasurer's uncle, Kalam assumed – shouted a greeting across the distance.

'Say hello,' the assassin growled. 'Who knows, if your cousins are good enough, you might win the day yet.'

The treasurer raised a hand, called out his answer.

There was less than ten paces between the two ships now. Salk Elan approached those of the *Ragstopper's* crew who stood near the marines. 'When she's close enough, use the grappling hooks. Make sure we're snug, lads, becuse if she gets away, she'll hound us from here to Falar.'

The pirate climbing the mast was halfway up, already swinging around to see if he could get a better look at the scene on *Ragstopper's* main deck.

The raider's crew threw lines across. The ships closed.

A cry of warning from the lookout was cut short by a crossbow quarrel. The man toppled, landing amidst his fellows crowding the raider's deck. Angry shouts arose.

Kalam gripped the treasurer by the collar and dragged him back as the first of the pirates leapt the distance and swarmed up *Ragstopper's* flank.

'You've made a terrible mistake,' the treasurer hissed.

The marines answered the assault with a murderous flight of quarrels. The first line of pirates pitched back.

Salk Elan shouted a warning that brought Kalam spinning around. Hovering just off the port side, directly behind the grouped marines, an apparition took form, its wings ten paces across, its shimmering scales bright yellow and blinding in the new day's light. The long reptilian head was a mass of fangs.

An *enkar'al – this far from Raraku – Hood's breath!*

'I warned you!' the treasurer laughed.

The creature was a blur as it plunged into the midst of the marines, talons crunching through chain and helms.

Kalam whirled again, drove his fist into the grinning treasurer's face. The man dropped to the deck unconscious, blood gushing from his nose and eyes.

'Kalam!' Salk Elan shouted. 'Leave the mage to me – help the marines!'

The assassin bolted forward. Enkar'al were mortal enough, just notoriously hard to kill, and rare even in their desert home – the assassin had never before faced one.

Seven marines were down. The creature's wings thundered as it hung over the rest, its two taloned limbs darting downward, clashing against shields.

Pirates were streaming onto *Ragstopper,* opposed now by only half a dozen marines, the lieutenant among them.

Kalam had little time to think of what he planned, and none to gauge Salk Elan's progress. 'Stiffen shields!' he bellowed, then leapt forward, scrambling onto the shields. The enkar'al twisted around, razor claws lashing at his face. He ducked and drove his long-knife up between the creature's legs.

The point jammed against scale, snapping like a twig.

'Hood!'

Dropping the weapon, Kalam surged upward, clambering over the gnarled, scaly hide. Jaws snapped down at him but could not reach. The assassin swung around, onto the beast's back.

Sorcerous concussions reached his ears from the raider's deck.

Thrusting knife in one hand, his other arm looped around the enkar'al's sinuous neck, Kalam began slashing at the beating wings. The blade slipped through membrane, opening wide, spreading gaps. The enkar'al fell to the deck, into the midst of the surviving marines, who closed in around it, thrusting with their short swords.

The heavier weapons succeeded where long-knife failed, driving between scales. Blood sprayed. The creature screamed, thrashing about in its death throes.

There was fighting on all sides now, as pirates converged to cut down the last of the marines. Kalam clambered off the dying enkar'al, shifted the knife to his left hand and found a short sword lying beside a dead marine, barely in time to meet the charge of two pirates, their heavy scimitars slashing down on both sides.

The assassin leapt between the two men, inside their reach, stabbed swiftly with both weapons, then pushed past, twisting his blades as he dragged them free.

His awareness blurred then, as Kalam surged through a crush of pirates, cutting, slashing and stabbing on all sides. He lost his knife as it jammed between ribs, used the freed hand to yank a helmet away from a collapsing warrior and jam it onto his head – the skullcap was too small, and a glancing blow from a wailing scimitar sent it flying even as he broke through the press, skidding on blood-slick decking as he spun around.

Half a dozen pirates wheeled to attack him.

Salk Elan struck the group from the side, a long-knife in either hand. Three pirates went down in the first attack. Kalam launched himself forward, batting aside a blade, then driving stiff fingers into its wielder's throat.

A moment later the clash of weapons had ceased. Figures were sprawled on all sides, some moaning, some shrieking and gibbering in pain, but most still and silent.

Kalam dropped to one knee, struggling to regain his breath.

'What a mess!' Salk Elan muttered, crouching to wipe his blades clean.

The assassin lifted his head and stared at him. Elan's fine clothes were scorched and soaked in blood. Half his face was bright red, flash-burned, the eyebrow on that side a smear of ash. He was breathing heavily, and every breath caused him obvious pain.

Kalam looked past the man. Not a single marine was standing. A handful of sailors moved among the bodies, pulling free those that still lived – they'd found but two thus far, neither one the lieutenant.

The acting First Mate came to the assassin's side. 'Cook wants to know.'

'What?'

'Is that big lizard tasty?'

Salk Elan's laugh became a cough.

'A delicacy,' Kalam muttered. 'A hundred jakatas a pound in Pan'potsun.'

'Permission to cross over to the raider, sir,' the sailor continued. 'We can resupply.'

The assassin nodded.

'I'll go with you,' Salk Elan managed.

'Appreciate that, sir.'

'Hey,' one of the sailors called, 'what should we do with the treasurer? The bastard's still alive.'

'Leave him to me,' Kalam said.

The treasurer was conscious as they loaded him down with sacks of coin, making noises behind his gag, his eyes wide. Kalam and Salk Elan carried the man between them to the side and pitched him over without ceremony.

Sharks converged on the splash the man made, but the effort of following him down proved too great for the already sated creatures.

The stripped-down raider was still burning beneath a column of smoke as it vanished beyond the horizon.

The Whirlwind lifted itself into a towering wall, higher than the eye could fathom and over a mile in width, around the Holy Desert Raraku. Within the wasteland's heart, all remained calm, the air refulgent with golden light.

Battered ridges of bedrock rose above the sands ahead, like blackened bones. Walking half a dozen paces in front, Leoman paused and turned. 'We must cross a place of spirits,' he said.

Felisin nodded. 'Older than this desert . . . they have risen and now watch us.'

'Do they mean us harm, Sha'ik Reborn?' the Toblakai asked, reaching for his weapon.

'No. They may be curious, but they are beyond caring.' She turned to Heboric. The ex-priest was still huddled within himself, hidden beneath his tattoos. 'What do you sense?'

He flinched away from her voice, as if every word sent his way was a jagged dart. 'One needn't be an immortal ghost not to care,' he muttered.

She studied him. 'Fleeing from the joy of being reborn cannot last, Heboric. What you fear is becoming human once again—'

His laugh was bitter, sardonic.

'You do not expect to hear such thoughts from me,' she noted. 'For all that you disliked what I was, you are loath to relinquish that child.'

'You're still in that rush of power, Felisin, and it's deluded you into thinking it's delivered wisdom as well. There are gifts, and then there is that which must be earned.'

'He is as shackles about you, Sha'ik Reborn,' the Toblakai growled. 'Kill him.'

She shook her head, still eyeing Heboric. 'Since wisdom cannot be gifted to me, I would be gifted a wise man. His company, his words.'

The ex-priest looked up at that, eyes narrowing beneath the heavy shelf of his brow. 'I thought you'd left me no choice, Felisin.'

'Perhaps it only seemed that way, Heboric'

She watched the struggle within him, the struggle that had always been there. We *have crossed a war-ravaged, land, and all the while we* were warring *with ourselves. Dryjhna has but raised a mirror* ... 'I have learned one thing from you, Heboric,' she said.

'And that is?'

'Patience.' She turned about, waved Leoman on.

They approached the folded, scarred outcroppings. There was little evidence that this place had once known sacred rites. The basaltic bedrock was impervious to the usual pitting and grooving that active hands often worked into the stone of holy sites, nor was there any pattern in the few boulders scattered about.

Yet Felisin could sense the presence of spirits, once strong, now but echoes, and their faint regard followed them with unseen eyes. Beyond the rise the desert swept out and down into an immense basin, where the dwindling sea of ancient times had finally died. Suspended dust cloaked the vast depression.

'The oasis lies near the centre,' Leoman said at her side.

She nodded.

'Less than seven leagues now.'

'Who carries Sha'ik's belongings?' she asked.

'I do.'

'I will take them.'

He was silent as he set down his pack, untied the flap and began removing items. Clothing, a scatter of a poor woman's rings, bracelets and earrings, a thin-bladed long-knife, its iron stained black except for the honed edge.

'Her sword awaits us at the encampment,' Leoman said when he'd done. 'She wore the bracelets on her left wrist only, the rings on her left hand.' He gestured down at some leather straps. 'She wound these around her right wrist and forearm.' He paused, looked up at her with hard eyes. 'It were best you matched the attire. Precisely.'

She smiled. 'To aid in the deceit, Leoman?'

He dropped his gaze. 'There may well be some . . . resistance. The High Mages—'

'Would bend the cause to their wills, create factions within the camp, then clash in a struggle to decide who will rule all. They have not yet done so, for they cannot determine if Sha'ik still lives. Yet they have prepared the ground.'

'Seer—'

'Ah, you accept that much at least.'

He bowed. 'None could deny the power that has come to you, yet...'

'Yet I did not myself open the Holy Book.'

He met her eyes. 'You did not.'

Felisin looked up. The Toblakai and Heboric stood a short distance away, watching, listening. 'What I shall open is not between those covers, but is within me. Now is not the time.' She faced Leoman again. 'You must trust in me.'

The skin tightened around the desert warrior's eyes.

'You never could easily yield that, could you, Leoman?'

'Who speaks?'

'We do.'

He was silent.

'Toblakai.'

'Yes, Sha'ik Reborn?'

'To a man who doubts you, you would use what?'

'My sword,' he replied.

Heboric snorted.

Felisin swung to him. 'And you? What would you use?'

'Nothing. I would be as I am, and if I prove worthy of trust, that man will come to it.'

'Unless ... ?'

He scowled. 'Unless that man cannot trust himself, Felisin.'

She turned back to Leoman and waited.

Heboric cleared his throat. 'You cannot command someone to have faith, lass. Obedience, yes, but not belief itself.'

She said to Leoman, 'You've told me there is a man to the south. A man leading a battered remnant of an army and refugees numbering tens of thousands. They do as he bids, their trust is absolute – how has that man managed that?'

Leoman shook his head.

'Have you ever followed such a leader, Leoman?'

'No.'

'So you truly do not know.'

'I do not know, Seer.'

Dismissive of the eyes of three men, Felisin stripped down and attired herself in Sha'ik's clothing. She donned the stained silver jewellery with an odd sense of long familiarity, then tossed aside the rags she had been wearing earlier. She studied the desert basin for a long moment, then said, 'Come, the High Mages have begun to lose their patience.'

'We're only a few days from Falar, according to the First Mate,' Kalam said. 'Everyone's talking about these tradewinds.'

'I bet they are,' the captain growled, looking as if he'd swallowed something sour.

The assassin refilled their tankards and leaned back. Whatever still afflicted the captain, keeping him to his cot for days now, went beyond the injuries he'd sustained at the hands of the bodyguard. Mind *you, head wounds can get complicated. Even so . . .* The captain trembled when he spoke, though his speech was in no way slurred or otherwise impaired. The struggle seemed to be in pushing the words out, in linking them into anything resembling a sentence. Yet in his eyes Kalam saw a mind no less sharp than it had been.

The assassin was baffled, yet he felt, on some instinctive level, that his presence gave strength to the captain's efforts. 'Lookout sighted a ship in our wake just before sunset yesterday – a Malazan fast trader, he thinks. If it was, it must have passed us without lights or hail in the night. No sign of it this morning.'

The captain grunted. 'Never made better time. Bet their eyes are wide, too, dropping headless cocks over the starboard side and into Bern's smiling maw at every blessed bell.'

Kalam took a mouthful of watered wine, studying the captain over the tankard's dented rim. 'We lost the last two marines last night. Left me wondering about that ship's healer of yours.'

'Been having a run of the Lord's push, he has. Not like him.'

'Well, he's passed out on pirates' ale right now.'

'Doesn't drink.'

'He does now.'

The look the captain gave him was like a bright, distant flare, a beacon warning of shoals ahead.

'All's not well, I take it,' the assassin quietly rumbled.

'Captain's head's askew, that's a fact. Tongue full of thorns, close by ears like acorns under the mulch, ready to hatch unseen. Hatch.'

'You'd tell me if you could.'

'Tell you what?' He reached a shaking hand towards the tankard. 'Can't hold what's not there, I always say. Can't hold in a blow, neither, lo, the acorn's rolled away, plumb away.'

'Your hands look well enough mended.'

'Aye, well enough.' The captain looked away, as if the effort of conversation had finally become too much.

The assassin hesitated, then said, 'I've heard of a warren ...'

'Rabbits,' the captain muttered. 'Rats.'

'All right,' Kalam sighed, rising. 'We'll find you a proper healer, a Denul healer, when we get to Falar.'

'Getting there fast.'

'Aye, we are.'

'On the tradewinds.'

'Aye.'

'But there aren't any tradewinds, this close to Falar.'

Kalam emerged onto the deck, held his face to the sky for a moment, then made his way to the forecastle.

'How does he fare?' Salk Elan asked.

'Poorly.'

'Head injuries are like that. Get knocked wrong and you end up muttering marriage vows to your lapdog.'

'We'll see in Falar.'

'We'd be lucky to find a good healer in Bantra.'

'Bantra? Hood's breath, why Bantra when the main islands are but a few leagues farther along?'

Elan shrugged. 'Ragstopper's home berth, it seems. In case you haven't noticed, our acting First Mate lives in a tangle of superstition. He's a legion of neurotic sailors all rolled up in one, Kalam, and on this one you won't sway him – Hood knows I've tried.'

A shout from the lookout interrupted their conversation. 'Sails! Two pegs off the port bow! Six . .. seven ... ten – Bern's blessing, a fleet!'

Kalam and Elan stepped over to the forecastle's portside rail. As yet, they could see nothing but waves.

The First Mate called up from the main deck. 'What's their bearing, Vole?'

'North, sir! And westerly. They'll cut across our wake, sir!'

'In about twelve hours,' Elan muttered, 'hard-tacking all the way.'

'A fleet,' Kalam said.

'Imperial. The Adjunct Tavore, friend.' The man turned and offered the assassin a tight smile. 'If you thought the blood had run thick enough over your homeland ... well, thank the gods we're heading the other way.'

They could see the first of the sails now. *Tavore's fleet. Horse and troop transports, the usual league-long wake of garbage, sewage and corpses human and animal, the sharks and dhenrabi thrashing the waves. Any long*

journey by sea delivers an army foul of temper and eager to get to business. No doubt enough tales of atrocities have reached them to scorch mercy from their souls.

'The serpent's head,' Elan said quietly, 'on that long, stretching Imperial neck. Tell me, Kalam, is there a part of you – an old soldier's – longing to be standing on a deck over there, noting with scant interest a lone, Falar-bound trader ship, while deep within you builds that quiet, deadly determination? On your way to deliver Laseen's punishment, what she's always delivered, as an Empress must; a vengeance tenfold. Are you tugged between two tides right now, Kalam?'

'My thoughts are not yours to pillage, Elan, no matter how rampant your imagination. You do not know me, nor shall you ever know me.'

The man sighed. 'We've fought side by side, Kalam. We proved ourselves a deadly team. Our mutual friend in Ehrlitan had suspicions of what you intend – think of how much greater your chances with me at your side ...'

Kalam slowly turned to face Elan. 'Chances of what?' he asked, his voice barely carrying.

Salk Elan's shrug was easy, careless. 'Whatever. You're not averse to partnerships, are you? There was Quick Ben and, before that, Porthal K'nastra – from your early pre-Imperial days in Karaschimesh. Hood knows, anyone looking at your history, Kalam, might well assert that you thrive on partnerships. Well, man, what do you say?'

The assassin responded with a slow blink of his lids. 'And what makes you think I am alone right now, Salk Elan?'

For the briefest yet most satisfying of moments, Kalam saw a flicker of uncertainty rattle Elan's face, before a smooth smile appeared. 'And where does he hide, up in the crow's nest with that dubiously named lookout?'

Kalam turned away. 'Where else?'

The assassin felt Salk Elan's eyes on his back as he strode away. *You've the arrogance common to every mage, friend. You'll have to excuse my pleasure in spreading cracks through it.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I stood in a place
where all shadows converged
the end of the Path of Hands
Soletaken and D'ivers
through the gates of truth
where from the darkness
all mysteries emerged.

The Path
Trout Sen'al'Bhok'arala

They came upon the four bodies at the edge of an upthrust of roots that seemed to mark the entrance to a vast maze. The figures were contorted, limbs shattered, their dark robes twisted and stiff with dried blood.

Recognition arrived dull and heavy in Mappo's mind, an answering of suspicions that came with little surprise. *Nameless Ones . . . Priests of the Azath, if such entities can have priests. How many cold hands have guided us here? Myself . . . Icarium . . . these two twisted roots . . . journeying to Tremorlor—*

With a grunt, Icarium stepped forward, his eyes on a broken staff lying beside one of the corpses. 'I have seen those before,' he said.

The Trell frowned at his friend. 'How? Where?'

'In a dream.'

'Dream?'

The Jhag gave him a half-smile. 'Oh yes, Mappo, I have dreams.' He faced the bodies again. 'It began as all such dreams begin. I am stumbling. In

pain. Yet I bear no wounds, and my weapons are clean. No, the pain is within me, as of a knowledge once gained, then lost yet again.'

Mappo stared at his friend's back, struggling to comprehend his words.

'I arrive,' the Jhag continued in dry tones, 'at the outskirts of a town. A Trellish town on the plain. It has been destroyed. Scars of sorcery stain the ground ... the air. Bodies rot in the streets, and Great Ravens have come to feed – their laughter is the voice of the stench.'

'Icarium—'

'And then a woman appears, dressed as are these here before us. A priestess. She holds a staff, from which fell power still bleeds.

'"What have you done?" I ask her.

'"Only what is necessary," is her soft reply. I see in her face a great fear as she looks upon me, and I am saddened by it. "Jhag, you must not wander alone."

'Her words seem to call up terrible memories. And images, faces – companions, countless in number. As if I have rarely been alone. Men and women have walked at my side, sometimes singly, sometimes in legion. These memories fill me with grief, as if in some way I have betrayed every one of those companions.' He paused, and Mappo saw his head slowly nod. 'Indeed, I understand this now. They were all guardians, like you, Mappo. And they all failed. Were, perhaps, killed by my own hand.'

He shook himself. 'The priestess sees what lies writ upon my face, for hers becomes its mirror. Then she nods. Her staff blossoms with sorcery ... and I wander a lifeless plain, alone. The pain is gone – where it had lodged within me, there is now nothing. And, as I feel my memories drift apart... away ... I sense I have but dreamed. And so awaken.' He turned then, offered Mappo a dreadful smile.

Impossible. A twisting of the truth. I saw the slaughter with my own eyes. I spoke with the priestess. You have been visited in your dreams, Icarium, with fickle malice.

Fiddler cleared his throat. 'Looks like they were guarding this entrance. Whatever found them proved too much.'

'They are known on the Jhag Odhan,' Mappo said, 'as the Nameless Ones.'

Icarium's eyes hardened on the Trell.

'That cult,' Apsalar muttered, 'is supposed to be extinct.'

The others looked at her. She shrugged. 'Dancer's knowledge.'

Iskaral sputtered. 'Hood take their rotting souls! Presumptuous bastards one and all – how dare they make such claims?'

'What claims?' Fiddler growled.

The High Priest hugged himself. 'Nothing. Speak nothing of it, yes. Servants of the Azath – pah! Are we naught but pieces on a gameboard? My master scoured them from the Empire, yes. A task for the Talons, as Dancer will tell you. A necessary cleansing, a plucking of a thorn from the Emperor's side. Slaughter and desecration. Merciless. Too many vulnerable secrets – corridors of power – oh, how they resented my master's entry into Deadhouse—'

'Iskaral!' Apsalar snapped.

The priest ducked as if cuffed.

Icarium faced the young woman. 'Who voiced that warning? Through your mouth – who spoke?'

She fixed cool eyes on him. 'Possessing these memories enforces a responsibility, Icarium, just as possessing none exculpates.'

The Jhag flinched.

Crokus had edged forward. 'Apsalar?'

She smiled. 'Or Cotillion? No, it is just me, Crokus. I am afraid I have grown weary of all these suspicions. As if I have no self unstained by the god who once possessed me. I was but a girl when I was taken. A fisherman's daughter. But I am no mere girl any more.'

Her father's sigh was loud. 'Daughter,' he rumbled, 'we ain't none of us what we once were, and there ain't nothing simple in what we've gone through to get here.' He scowled, as if struggling for words. 'But you ordered the High Priest to shut up, to protect secrets that Dancer – Cotillion – would want kept that way. So Icarium's suspicions were natural enough.'

'Yes,' she countered, 'I am not a slave to what I was. I decide what to do with the knowledge I possess. I choose my own causes, Father.'

Icarium spoke. 'I stand chastised, Apsalar.' He faced Mappo again. 'What more do you know of these Nameless Ones, friend?'

Mappo hesitated, then said, 'Our tribe welcomed them as guests, but their visits were rare. I believe, however, that indeed they view themselves as servants of the Azath. If Trell legends hold any truth, then the cult may well date from the time of the First Empire—'

'They have been eradicated!' Iskaral shrieked.

'Within the borders of the Malazan Empire, perhaps,' Mappo conceded.

'My friend,' Icarium said, 'you are withholding truths. I would hear them.'

The Trell sighed. 'They have taken it upon themselves to recruit your guardians, Icarium, and have done so since the beginning.'

'Why?'

'That I do not know. Now that you ask it—' He frowned. 'An interesting question. Dedication to noble vows? Protection of the Azath?' Mappo shrugged.

'Hood's stubby ankles!' Rellock growled. 'Might be guilt, for all we know.'

All eyes swung to him.

After a long, silent moment, Fiddler shook himself. 'Come on, then. Into the maze.'

Arms and limbs. What clawed at the binding roots, what stretched and twisted in a hopeless effort to pull free, what reached out in supplication, in silent appeal and in deadly offer from all sides, was an array of imprisoned life, and few among those horridly animate projections were human in origin.

Fiddler's imagination failed his compulsive desire to fashion likely bodies, heads and faces to such limbs, even as he knew that the reality of what lay hidden within the woven walls would pale his worst nightmares.

Tremorlor's gnarled gaol of roots held demons, ancient Ascendants and such a host of alien creatures that the sapper was left trembling in the realization of his insignificance and that of all his kind. Humans were but one tiny, frail leaf on a tree too massive even to comprehend. The shock of that unmanned him, mocking his audacity with an endless echo of ages and realms trapped within this mad, riotous prison.

They could hear battles raging on all sides, thus far mercifully in other branches of the tortured maze. The Azath was being assailed from all fronts. The sound of snapping, shattering wood cracked through the air. Bestial screams rent the iron-smeared air above them, voices lost from the throats that released them, voices the only thing that could escape this terrifying war.

The crossbow's stock was slick with sweat in Fiddler's hands as he edged forward, keeping to the centre of the path, beyond the reach of those grasping, unhuman hands. A sharp bend lay just ahead. The sapper crouched down, then glanced back at the others.

Only three Hounds remained. Shan and Gear had set off, taking divergent paths. Where they were now and what was happening to them Fiddler had no idea, but Baran, Blind and Rood did not seem perturbed at their absence. The sightless female padded at Icarium's side as if she was nothing more than a well-trained companion to the Jhag. Baran held back as rearguard, while Rood – pale, mottled, a solid mass of muscle – waited not five paces from Fiddler's position, motionless. Its eyes, a dark liquid brown, seemed fixed on the sapper.

He shivered, his gaze flicking once again to Blind. *At Icarium's side . . . so dose* ... He understood that proximity all too clearly, as did Mappo. If bargains could be struck with a House of the Azath, then Shadowthrone had managed it. The Hounds would not be taken – as much as Tremorlor would have yearned for such prizes, for the abrupt and absolute removal of these ancient killers – no, the deal involved a much greater prize ...

Mappo stood on the Jhag's other side, the burnished long-bone club raised before him. A surge of compassion flooded Fiddler. The Trell was being torn apart from within. He had more than just shapeshifters to guard against – there was, after all, the companion he loved as a brother.

Crokus and Apsalar, the former with his fighting knives out and held in admirably relaxed grips, flanked Servant. Pust slunk along a step behind them.

And this *is what we are. This, and no more than this.*

He had paused before the bend in response to an instinctive hesitation that seemed to wrap an implacable grip around his spine. Go *no farther. Wait.* The sapper sighed. *Wait for what?*

His eyes, still wandering over the group behind him, caught on something, focused.

Rood's hackles had begun a slow rise.

'Hood!"

Movement exploded all around him, a massive shape barrelling into view directly ahead with a roar that turned Fiddler's marrow into spikes of ice. And above, a thudding flapping of leathery wings, huge talons darting down.

The charging Soletaken was a brown bear, as big as a noble-born's carriage, both flanks brushing the root walls of the maze, where arms were pulled, stretched, hands closed on thick fur. The sapper saw one unhuman limb torn from the trio of joints that formed its shoulder, spurting old, black blood. Ignoring these desperate efforts as if they were no more than burrs and thorns, the bear lunged forward.

Fiddler dropped to the root-bound floor – the bark hot and greasy with some kind of sweat – sparing no breath to shout even a warning. Not that it was needed.

The bear's underside swept over him in a blur, the fur pale and smeared in blood, then it was past, even as the sapper rolled to follow its attack.

The bear's attention was fixed exclusively on the blood-red enkar'al hovering before it – another Soletaken, shrieking with rage. The bear's paws lashed out, closing on empty air as the winged reptile darted backward – and into the reach of Mappo's club.

Fiddler could not fathom the strength behind the Trell's two-handed, full-shouldered swing. The weapon's tusked head struck the enkar'al's ridged chest and plunged inward with a snapping of bones. The enkar'al, itself the size of an ox, seemed literally to crumple and fold around that blow. Wing bones broke, neck and head were thrown forward, eyes and nostrils spraying blood.

The reptilian Soletaken was dead before it struck the root wall. Talons and hands received and held it.

'No!' Mappo roared.

Fiddler's gaze darted to Icarium – but the Jhag was not the cause of the Trell's cry, for the Hound Rood had attacked the massive bear, striking it from the side.

With a scream the Soletaken lurched sideways, up against the root wall. Few were the reaching limbs that could hold fast such a beast, yet one awaited it, one wrapped its green-skinned length around the bear's thick neck, and that one possessed a strength beyond even the Soletaken's.

Rood clamped a flailing paw in its jaws, crushing bones, then tore the appendage away with savage shakes of its head.

'Messremb!' the Trell bellowed, struggling in Icarium's restraining grip. 'An ally!'

'A Soletaken!' Iskaral Pust shrieked, dancing around.

Mappo sagged suddenly. 'A friend,' he whispered.

And Fiddler understood. *The first friend lost this day. The first. . .*

Tremorlor laid claim to both shapeshifters as roots snaked out, wrapping around the newcomers. The two beasts now faced each other on their respective walls – *their eternal resting places.* The Soletaken bear, blood gushing from the stump at the end of one limb, struggled on, but even its prodigious strength was useless against the otherworldly might of the Azath and the arm that held it, now tightening. Messremb's constricted throat struggled to find air. The red rims around its dark-brown eyes took on a bluish cast, the eyes bulging from their damp, streaked nests of fur.

Rood had pulled away and was placidly devouring the severed paw, bones and flesh and fur.

'Mappo,' Icarium said, 'see that stranger's arm crushing the life from him – do you understand? Not an eternal prison for Messremb. Hood will take him – death will take him, as it did the enkar'al...'

The entwining roots from the opposing walls reached out to each other, almost touching.

'The maze finds a new wall,' Crokus said.

'Quickly then,' Fiddler snapped, only now regaining his feet. 'Everyone to this side.'

They moved on, silent once again. Fiddler found his hands trembling incessantly now where they gripped his pitiful weapon. The strengths and savagery he had witnessed minutes earlier clashed with such alarm that it left his mind numb.

We cannot survive this. A hundred Hounds of Shadow would not be enough. Such shapeshifting creatures have arrived in their thousands, all here, all in Tremorlor's grounds – how many will reach the House? Only the strongest. The strongest . . . And what is it we dare? To *step within the House, to find the gate that will take us to Malaz City, to the Deadhouse*

itself. Gods, we are but minor players. . . with one exception, a man we cannot afford to unleash, a man even the Azath fears.

Sounds of fierce battle assailed them from all sides. The other corridors of this infernal maze played host to a mayhem that Fiddler knew they themselves would soon be unable to avoid. Indeed, those terrible sounds had grown louder, closer. *We're getting nearer the House. We're all converging ...*

He stopped, turning towards the others. He left his warning unspoken, for every face, every set of eyes that met his, bespoke the same knowledge.

Claws clattered ahead and the sapper whirled to see Shan arrive, slowing quickly from a frantic run. Her flanks were heaving, tracked in countless wounds.

Oh, Hood . . .

Another sound reached them, approaching from up the trail, from where the Hound had just come.

'He was warned!' Icarium cried. 'Gryllen! You were warned!'

Mappo had wrapped his arms around the Jhag. Icarium's sudden surge of anger stilled the air on all sides – as if an entire warren had drawn breath. The Jhag was motionless in that embrace, yet the sapper saw the Trell's arms strain, stretch to an unseen force. The sound that broke from Mappo was a thing of such pain, such distress and fear that Fiddler sagged, tears starting from his eyes.

The Hound Blind stepped away from Icarium's side, and the shock of seeing her tail dip jolted through the sapper.

Rood and Baran joined Shan, forming a nervous barrier – leaving Fiddler on the wrong side. He scrambled back, his limbs moving jerkily, as if weakened by a gallon of wine in his veins. His gaze held on Icarium, as the edge they now all tottered on finally revealed itself, promising horror.

All three Hounds flinched and jolted back a step. Fiddler spun about. The path ahead was closed into a new wall, a seething, swarming wall. *Oh, my,*

we meet again.

The girl was no more than eleven or twelve, wearing a leather vest on which was stitched overlapping bronze scales – flattened coins, in fact – and the spear she held in her hands was heavy enough to waver as she resolutely maintained her guard stance.

Felisin glanced down at the basketful of braided flowers at the girl's bare, dusty feet. 'You've some skill with those,' she said.

The young sentry glanced again at Leoman, then the Toblakai.

'You may lower your weapon,' the desert warrior said.

The spear's trembling point dropped down to the sand.

The Toblakai's voice was hard, 'Kneel before Sha'ik Reborn!'

She was prostrate in an instant.

Felisin reached down and touched the girl's head. 'You may rise. What is your name?'

As she climbed hesitantly upright, she answered with a shake of her head.

'Likely one of the orphans,' Leoman said. 'None to speak for her in the naming rite. Thus, she has no name, yet she would give her life for you, Sha'ik Reborn.'

'If she would give her life for me, then she has earned a name. So with the other orphans.'

'As you wish – who then will speak for them?'

'I shall, Leoman.'

The edge of the oasis was marked by low, crumbling mud-brick walls and a thin scatter of palms under which sand crabs scuttled through dry fronds. A dozen white goats stood in nearby shade, light-grey eyes turned towards the newcomers.

Felisin reached down and collected one of the bracelets of braided flowers. She slipped it over her right wrist.

They continued on into the heart of the oasis. The air grew cooler; the pools of shadow they passed through were a shock after so long under unrelieved sunlight. The endless ruins revealed that a city had once stood here, a city of spacious gardens and courtyards, pools and fountains, all reduced to stumps and low ridges.

Corrals ringed the camp, the horses within them looking healthy and fit.

'How large is this oasis?' Heboric asked.

'Can you not enquire of the ghosts?' Felisin asked.

'I'd rather not. This city's destruction was anything but peaceful. Ancient invaders, crushing the last of the First Empire's island enclaves. The thin sky-blue potsherds under our feet are First Empire, the thick red ones are from the conquerors. From something delicate to something brutal, a pattern repeated through all of history. These truths weary me, down to my very soul.'

'The oasis is vast,' Leoman told the ex-priest. 'There are areas that hold true soil, and these we have planted with forage and crops. A few ancient cedar stands remain, amidst stumps that have turned to stone. There are pools and lakes, the water fresh and unending. Should we choose, we need never leave this place.'

'How many people?'

'Eleven tribes. Forty thousand of the best-trained cavalry this world has ever seen.'

Heboric grunted. 'And what can cavalry do against legions of infantry, Leoman?'

The desert warrior grinned. 'Only change the face of war, old man.'

'It's been tried before,' Heboric said. 'What has made the Malazan military so successful is its ability to adapt, to alter tactics – even on the field of

battle. You think the Empire has not met horse cultures before, Leoman? Met, and subdued. A fine example would be the Wickans, or the Seti.'

'And how did the Empire succeed?'

'I am not the historian for such details – they never interested me. Had you a library with Imperial texts – works by Duiker and Tallobant – you could read for yourself. Assuming you can read Malazan, that is.'

'You define the limits of their region, the map of their seasonal rounds. You take and hold water sources, building forts and trading posts – for trade weakens your enemy's isolation, the very source of their power. And, depending on how patient you are, you either fire the grasslands and slaughter every animal on four legs, or you wait, and to every band of youths that rides into your settlements, you offer the glory of war and booty in foreign lands, with the promise to keep the group intact as a fighting unit. Such a lure plucks the flower from those tribes, until none but old men and old women mutter about the freedom that once existed,' Leoman replied.

'Ah, someone's done their reading, then.'

'Aye, we possess a library, Heboric. A vast one, at Sha'ik Elder's insistence. "Know your enemy better than they know themselves." So said Emperor Kellanved.'

'No doubt, though I dare say he wasn't the first.'

The mudbrick residences of the tribes appeared on all sides as the group emerged from an avenue between horse pens. Children ran in the sandy streets, trader carts pulled by mules and oxen were slowly winding their way out from the centre, the market done for the day. Packs of dogs came forward to assuage their curiosity, then fled at the rank challenge of the stiff roll of white bear fur resting across the Toblakai's broad shoulders.

A crowd began to gather, following them as they made their way towards the settlement's heart. Felisin felt a thousand eyes on her, heard the uncertain murmuring. *Sha'ik, yet not Sha'ik. Yet Sha'ik, for look at her two favoured bodyguards, the Toblakai and Leoman of the Wastes, the great warriors thinned by their journey into the desert. The prophecy spoke of*

rebirth, a renewal. Sha'ik has returned. At *long last, and she is reborn. Sha'ik Reborn—*

'Sha'ik Reborn!' The two words found a hissing cadence, a rhythm like waves, growing louder. The crowds burgeoned, word spreading with swift breath.

'I hope there's a clearing or amphitheatre at the centre,' Heboric muttered. He gave Felisin an ironic grin. 'When did we last travel a crowded street, lass?'

'Better from shame to triumph than the other way around, Heboric'

'Aye, I'll not argue that.'

'There is a parade ground before the palace tent,' Leoman said.

'Palace tent? Ah, a message of impermanence, a symbol saluting tradition – the power of the old ways of life and all that.'

Leoman turned to Felisin. 'Your companion's lack of respect could prove problematic, Sha'ik Reborn. When we meet the High Mages—'

'He'll wisely keep his mouth shut.'

'He had better.'

'Cut out his tongue,' the Toblakai growled. 'Then we need not worry.'

'No?' Heboric laughed. 'You underestimate me still, oaf. I am blind, yet I see. Cut out my tongue and oh, how I shall speak! Relax, Felisin, I'm no fool.'

'You are if you continue using her old name,' Leoman warned.

Felisin left them to bicker, sensing that, at last, despite the sharp edges to the words they threw at one another, a bond was developing between the three men. Not something as simple as friendship – the Toblakai and Heboric had chains of hatred linking them, after all – but one of experiences shared. My *rebirth is what they share, even as they stand as points of a triangle, with Leoman the apex. Leoman, the man with no beliefs.* They

were nearing the settlement's centre. She saw a platform to one side, a disc-shaped dais surrounding a fountain. 'There, to start.'

Leoman turned in surprise. 'What?'

'I would speak to these followers.'

'Now? Before we meet with the High Mages?'

'Yes.'

'You would make the three most powerful men in this camp wait?'

'Would that concern Sha'ik, Leoman? Does my rebirth require their blessing? Unfortunately they weren't there, were they?'

'But—'

'Time for you to shut your mouth, Leoman,' Heboric said, not unkindly.

'Clear a path for me, Toblakai,' Felisin said.

The giant swung abruptly, cutting directly for the platform. He said nothing, for nothing was needed. His presence alone split the mob, peeled it back on both sides in hushed silence.

They reached the dais. 'I shall need your lungs to start, Toblakai. Name me once I've ascended.'

'I shall, Chosen One.'

Heboric snorted softly. 'Now that's an apt title.'

A cascade of thoughts swept through Felisin as she climbed onto the stone platform. *Sha'ik Reborn, that dark cloak of Dryjhna descending. Felisin, noble-born brat of Unta, whore of the mining pit. Open the Holy Book and thus complete the rite. That young woman has seen the face of the Abyss – that terrible journey behind her – and now comes the demand that she face the one before her. The young woman must relinquish her life. Opening the Holy Book –* yet *who would have thought the goddess so amenable to a deal? She knows my heart, and that grants her the confidence, it seems, of deferring her claim on it. The deal has been struck. Power granted – so*

many visions – yet Felisin remains, her rock-hard, scarred soul floats free in the vast Abyss.

And Leoman knows . . .

'Kneel before Sha'ik Reborn!' The Toblakai's bellow was like thunder in the hot, motionless air. As one, thousands dropped down, heads bowed.

Felisin stepped past the giant. Dryjhna's power trickled into her – *ah, dear goddess, precious patroness, do you now hesitate in your gifts? Like* this *crowd, like Leoman, do you await the proof of my words? My intent?*

Yet the power was sufficient to make her quiet words a clear whisper in the ears of everyone present – including those of the three High Mages who now stood beneath the parade-ground archway – *who stood, who did not kneel.* 'Rise, my faithful ones.'

She felt the three distant men flinch at that, as they were meant to. *Oh yes, I know where you stand, you three* . . . 'The Holy Desert Raraku lies protected within the Whirlwind circle, ensuring the sanctity of my return. While beyond, the rebellion's claim to dominion – to rightful independence from the Malazan tyrants – continues its spreading tide of blood. My servants lead vast armies. All but one of the Seven Holy Cities have been liberated.' She was silent a moment, feeling the power building within her, yet when she spoke again it was in a low whisper. 'Our time of preparation is at an end. The time has come to march, to set forth from this oasis. The Empress, upon her distant throne, would punish us. A fleet approaches Seven Cities, an army commanded by her chosen Adjunct, a commander whose mind I hold as a map within my own – she possesses no secrets I do not know ...'

The three High Mages had not moved. Felisin was gifted with knowing them, a sudden rush of knowledge that could only be Sha'ik Elder's. She could see their faces as if she stood but a pace from each of them, and she knew that they now shared that sense of sudden, precise proximity – and a part of her found admiration in their refusal to tremble. The eldest of the three was ancient, withered Bidithal, the one who had first found her, no more than a child, in answer to his own visions. His filmy eyes were fixed

on her own. Bidithal, *remember that child? The one you used so brutally that first and only* night, *to scourge from her all pleasures of the flesh. You broke her within her own body, left scars that felt nothing, that were senseless. The child would not be distracted, no children of her own, no man at her side who could wrest loyalty away from the goddess.* Bidithal, I *have reserved a place for you in the fiery Abyss, as you well know. But for now, you serve me. Kneel.*

She saw with two visions, one close, the other from the distant vantage point of the platform, as the old man sank down, robes folding around him. She turned her attention to the next man. *Febryl, the most craven and conniving of my High Mages. Thrice you sought to poison me, and thrice Dryjhna's power burned the poison from my veins –* yet not *once did I condemn you. Did you believe me ignorant of your efforts? And your most ancient secret – your flight from Dassem Ultor before the final battle, your betrayal of the cause – did you think I knew nothing of* this? *Nonetheless, I have need of you, for you are the lodestone of dissent, of those who would betray me. On your knees, bastard!* She added a surge of power to the command, which drove the man down to the ground as if with an invisible giant hand. He squirmed on the soft sand, whimpering.

Finally, we come to you, L'oric, my only true mystery. Your sorcerous arts are formidable, particularly in weaving an impervious barrier about you. The cast of your mind is unknown to me, even the breadth and depth of your loyalty. And though you seem faith' less, I have found you the most reliable. For you are a pragmatist, L'oric. Like Leoman. Yet I am ever on your scales, my every *decision, my* every *word. So, judge me now, High Mage, and decide.*

He dropped to one knee, bowed his head.

Felisin smiled. *Half-measured. Very pragmatic, L'oric. I have missed you.*

She saw his wry answering smile there in the shadows cast by his hood.

Finished with the three men, Felisin's attention returned to the crowd awaiting her next pronouncement. Silence gripped the air. *What is left?* 'We

must march, my children. Yet that alone is not enough. We must *announce* what we are about to do, for all to see.'

The goddess was ready.

Felisin – *Sha'ik Reborn* – raised her arms.

The golden dust twisted above her, corkscrewed into a column. It grew. The spout of raging wind and dust burgeoned, climbed skyward, drawing in the desert's gilded cloak, the breath clearing the vast dome on all sides, revealing a blue expanse that had not been seen for months.

And still the column grew, surging higher, ever higher.

The Whirlwind was naught but preparation for this. This, the raising of Dryjhna's standard, the spear that is the Apocalypse. A standard to tower over an entire continent, seen by all. Now, at last, the war begins. My *war.*

Her head tilted back, she let her sorcerous vision feast on what was rising to the very edge of heaven's canopy. *Dear sister, see what you've made.*

The crossbow jolted in Fiddler's hands. A gout of fire bloomed in the heaving mass of rats, blackening and roasting scores of the creatures.

From point, the sapper had become rearguard, as the group retreated from Gryllen's nightmare pursuit. 'The D'ivers has stolen powerful lives,' said Apsalar, and Mappo, struggling to pull Icarium back, had nodded. 'Gryllen has never before shown such ... capacity ...'

Capacity. Fiddler grunted, chewing at the word. The last time he'd seen this D'ivers, the rats had been present in their hundreds. Now they were in their thousands, perhaps tens of thousands – he could only guess at their numbers.

The Hound Gear had rejoined them and now led their retreat down side tracks and narrow tunnels. They were seeking to circle around Gryllen – they could do naught else.

Until *Icarium loses control, and gods, he's close. Far too close.*

The sapper reached into his munitions, his fingers touching his last cusser, then brushing past, finding instead another flamer. No time to affix it to a quarrel, and he was running out of those anyway. The swarm's lead creatures, scampering towards him, were no more than half a dozen paces away. Fiddler's heart stuttered in his chest – *Have I let them get too close this time? Hood's breath!* He flung the grenado.

Roast rat.

Heaving bodies swallowed the liquid fire, rolled and tumbled towards him.

The sapper wheeled and ran.

He nearly plunged into Shan's blood-smeared jaws. Wailing, Fiddler dodged, spun, went sprawling among boots and moccasins. The group had come to a halt. He scrambled upright. 'We got to run!'

'Where?' The question came from Crokus, in a dry, heavy tone.

They were at a bend in the path, and at both ends swarmed a solid wall of rats.

Four Hounds attacked the far mob, only Shan remaining with the group – taking the place of Blind, perilously close to Icarium.

With a shriek of rage the Jhag threw Mappo from his shoulders with a seemingly effortless shrug. The Trell staggered, lost his balance and struck the root floor with a rattling thud.

'Everybody down!' Fiddler screamed, his hand blindly reaching into the munitions bag, closing on that large, smooth object within.

Keening, Icarium drew his sword. Wood snapped and recoiled in answer. The iron sky blushed crimson, began twisting into a vortex directly above them. Sap sprayed from the walls like sleet, spattering everyone.

Shan attacked Icarium but was batted aside, sent flying, the Jhag barely noticing.

Fiddler stared at Icarium a moment longer; then, pulling his cusser free, the sapper wheeled around and threw it at the D'ivers.

But it was not a cusser.

Eyes wide, Fiddler stared as the conch shell struck the root floor and shattered like glass.

He heard a savage crack behind him, but had no time to give it thought, and all further sounds vanished as a whispering voice rose from the ruined shell – *a Tano Spiritwalker's* gift – a whispering that soon filled the air, a song of bones, finding muscle as it swept outward.

The heaving mass of rats on both sides sought to retreat, but there was nowhere to flee – the sound enveloped all. The creatures began crumpling, the flesh withering, leaving only fur and bones. The song took that flesh, and so grew.

Gryllen's thousand-voiced scream was an anguished explosion of pain and terror. And it, too, was swallowed, devoured.

Fiddler clapped his hands to his ears as the song resonated within, insistent, a voice anything but human, anything but mortal. He twisted away, fell to his knees. His wide eyes stared, barely registering what he saw before him.

His companions were down, curling around themselves. The Hounds cowered, the massive beasts trembling, ears flat. Mappo crouched over the prone, motionless form of Icarium. In the Trell's hands was his bone club, the flat side of the head spattered with fresh blood and snagged strands of long reddish hair. Mappo finally dropped the weapon and slapped his hands over his ears.

Gods, this *will kill us all – stop! Stop, dammit!*

He realized he was going mad, his vision betraying him, for he now saw a wall, a wall of water, sleet grey and webbed with foam, rushing upon them down the path, building higher, escaping the root-walls and tumbling outward. And he found he could see into the wall now, as if it had turned to liquid glass. Wreckage, foundation stones softened by algae, the rotting

remains of sunken ships, encrusted, shapeless hunks of oxidized metal, bones, skulls, casks and bronze-bound chests, splintered masts and fittings – the submerged memory of countless civilizations, an avalanche of tragic events, dissolution and decay.

The wave buried them, drove them all down with its immense weight, its relentless force.

Then was gone, leaving them dry as dust.

Silence filled the air, slowly broken by harsh gasps, bestial whimpers, the muted rustling of clothing and weapons.

Fiddler lifted his head, pushing himself to his hands and knees. Ghostly remnants of that flood seemed to stain him through and through, permeating him with ineffable sorrow.

Protective sorcery?

The Spiritwalker had smiled. *Of a sort.*

And I'd planned on selling the damned thing in G'danisban. My last *cusser was a damned conch shell – I never checked, not once. Hood's breath!*

He was slow to sense a new tension rising in the air. The sapper looked up. Mappo had retrieved his club and now stood over Icarium's unconscious form. Around him ranged the Hounds. Raised hackles on all sides.

Fiddler scrabbled for his crossbow. 'Iskaral Pust! Call off those Hounds, damn you!'

'The bargain! The Azath will take him!' the High Priest gasped, still staggering about in the stunned aftermath of the Tano's sorcery. 'Now's the time!'

'No,' growled the Trell.

Fiddler hesitated. *The deal, Mappo. Icarium made his wishes plain . . .* 'Call them off, Pust,' he said, moving towards the nervous stand-off. He plunged one hand into his munition bag and swung the leather sack around

until he clutched it against his stomach. 'Got one last cusser, and those Hounds could be made of solid marble, it won't save 'em when I fall down on what I'm holding here.'

'Damned sappers! Who invented them? Madness!'

Fiddler grinned. 'Who invented them? Why, Kellanved, who else – who Ascended to become your god, Pust. I'd have thought you'd appreciate the irony, High Priest.'

'The bargain—'

'Will wait a while longer. Mappo, how hard did you hit him? How long will he be out?'

'As long as I wish, friend.'

Friend, and in that word: 'thank you.'

'All right then. Call the mutts off, Pust. Let's get to the House.'

The High Priest ceased his circling stagger; he paused, slowly weaving back and forth. Glancing over at Apsalar, he offered her a wide grin.

'As the soldier says,' she said.

The grin vanished. 'The youth of today knows no loyalty. A shame, not at all how things used to be. Wouldn't you agree, Servant?'

Apsalar's father grimaced. 'You heard her.'

'Far too permissive, letting her get her way so. You've spoiled her, man! Betrayed by my own generation, alas! What next?'

'What's next is, we get going,' Fiddler said.

'And it won't be much farther,' Crokus said. He pointed down the path. 'There. I see the House. I see Tremorlor.'

The sapper watched Mappo sling his weapon over a shoulder, then gently lift Icarium. The Jhag hung limply within those massive arms. The scene was touched with such gentle caring that Fiddler had to look away.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Day of Pure Blood
was a gift of the Seven
from their tombs of sand.
Fortune was a river
the glory a gift of the Seven
that flowed yellow and crimson
across the day.

Dog Chain
Thes'soran

In the local Can'eld dialect, it would come to be called Mesh'arn tho'ledann: the Day of Pure Blood. The River Vathar's mouth gushed blood and corpses into Dojal Hading Sea for close to a week after the slaughter, a tide that deepened from red to black amidst pallid, bloated bodies. To the fisher-folk plying those waters, that time was called the Season of Sharks, and more than one net was cut away before a ghastly harvest was pulled aboard.

Horror knew no sides, played no favourites. It spread like a stain outward, from tribe to tribe, from one city to the next. And from that revulsion was born fear among the natives of Seven Cities. A Malazan fleet was on its way, commanded by a woman hard as iron. What happened at Vathar Crossing was a whetstone to hone her deadly edge.

Yet, Korbolo Dom was anything but finished.

The cedar forest south of the river rose on tiered steps of limestone, the trader track crazed with switchbacks and steep, difficult slopes. And the deeper into the wood the depleted train went, the more ancient, the more uncanny it became.

Duiker led his mare by the reins, stumbling as rocks turned underfoot. Alongside him clattered a wagon, sagging with wounded soldiers. Corporal List sat on the buckboard, his switch snapping the dusty, sweat-runnelled backs of the pair of oxen labouring at their yokes.

The losses at Vathar Crossing were a numb litany in the historian's mind. Over twenty thousand refugees, a disproportionate number of children among them. Less than five hundred able fighters remained in the Foolish Dog Clan, and the other two clans were almost as badly mauled. Seven hundred soldiers of the Seventh were dead, wounded or lost. A scant dozen engineers remained on their feet, and but a score of marines. Three noble families had been lost – an unacceptable attrition, this latter count, as far as the Council was concerned.

And Sormo E'nath. Within the one man, eight elder warlocks, a loss of not just power, but knowledge, experience and wisdom. A blow that had driven the Wickans to their knees.

Earlier that day, at a time when the train had ground to a temporary halt, Captain Lull had joined the historian to share some rations. Few words passed between them to start, as if the events at Vathar Crossing were something not to be talked about, even as they spread like a plague through every thought and echoed ghostlike behind every scene around them, every sound that rose from the camp.

Lull slowly put away the remnants of their meal. Then he paused, and Duiker saw the man studying his own hands, which had begun trembling. The historian looked away, surprised at the sudden shame that swept through him. He saw List, wrapped in sleep on the buckboard, trapped within his prison of dreams. I *could in mercy awaken the lad, yet the power for knowledge has mastered me. Cruelty comes easy these days.*

The captain sighed after a moment, hastily completing the task. 'Do you find the need to answer all this, Historian?' he asked. 'All those tomes you've read, those other thoughts from other men, other women. Other times. How does a mortal make answer to what his or her kind are capable of? Does each of us, soldier or no, reach a point when all that we've seen,

survived, changes us inside? Irrevocably changes us. What do we become, then? Less human, or *more* human? Human enough, or too human?'

Duiker was silent for a long minute, his eyes on the rock-studded dirt that surrounded the boulder upon which he sat. Then he cleared his throat. 'Each of us has his own threshold, friend. Soldier or no, we can only take so much before we cross over... into something else. As if the world has shifted around us, though it's only our way of looking at it. A change of perspective, but there's no intelligence to it – you see but do not feel, or you weep yet look upon your own anguish as if from somewhere else, somewhere outside. It's not a place for answers, Lull, for every question has burned away. More human or less human – that's for you to decide.'

'Surely it has been written of, by scholars, priests . . . philosophers?'

Duiker smiled down at the dirt. 'Efforts have been made. But those who themselves have crossed that threshold ... well, they have few words to describe the place they've found, and little inclination to attempt to explain it. As I said, it's a place without intelligence, a place where thoughts wander, formless, unlinked. Lost.'

'Lost,' the captain repeated. 'I am surely that.'

'Yet you and I, Lull, we are lost late in our lives. Look upon the children, and despair.'

'How to answer this? I must know, Duiker, else I go mad.'

'Sleight of hand,' the historian said.

'What?'

'Think of the sorcery we've seen in our lives, the vast, unbridled, deadly power we've witnessed unleashed. Driven to awe and horror. Then think of a trickster – those you saw as a child – the games of illusion and artifice they could play out with their hands, and so bring wonder to your eyes.'

The captain was silent, motionless. Then he rose. 'And there's my answer?'

'It's the only one I can think of, friend. Sorry if it's not enough.'

'No, old man, it's enough. It has to be, doesn't it?'

'Aye, that it does.'

'Sleight of hand.'

The historian nodded. 'Ask for nothing more, for the world – this world – won't give it.'

'But where will we find such a thing?'

'Unexpected places,' Duiker replied, also rising. Somewhere ahead, shouts rose and the convoy resumed its climb once more. 'If you fight both tears and a smile, you'll have found one.'

'Later, Historian.'

'Aye.'

He watched the captain set off back towards his company of soldiers, and wondered if all he'd said, all he'd offered to the man, was nothing but lies.

The possibility returned to him now, hours later as he trudged along on the trail. One of those random, unattached thoughts that were coming to characterize the blasted scape of his mind. Returned, lingered a moment, then drifted away and was gone.

The journey continued, beneath clouds of dust and a few remaining butterflies.

Korbolo Dom pursued, sniping at the train's mangled tail, content to await better ground before another major engagement. Perhaps even he quailed at what Vathar Forest had begun to reveal.

Among the tall cedars there were trees of some other species that had turned to stone. Gnarled and twisted, the petrified wood embraced objects that were themselves fossilized – the trees held offerings and had, long ago, grown around them. Duiker well recalled the last time he had seen such things, in what had been a holy place in the heart of an oasis, just north of Hissar. That site had revealed ram's horns locked in the wrapped crooks of

branches, and there were plenty of those here as well, although they were the least disquieting of Vathar's offerings.

T'lan Imass. No room for doubt – their undead faces stare out at us, from all sides, skulls and withered faces peering out from wreaths of crystallized bark, the dark pits of their eyes tracking our passage. This is a burial ground, not of the flesh-and-blood forebears of the T'lan Imass, but of the deathless creatures themselves.

List's visions of ancient war – we see here its aftermath. Crumpled platforms were visible as well, stone latticework perched amidst branches that had once grown around them, closing up the assembled bones like the fingers of stone hands.

At the war's end, the survivors came here, carrying those comrades too shattered to continue, and made of this forest their eternal home. The souls of the T'lan Imass cannot join Hood, cannot even flee their prisons of bone and withered flesh. One does not bury such things – that sentence of earthen darkness offers no peace. Instead, let those remnants look out from their perches upon one another, upon the rare mortal passages on this trail. . .

Corporal List saw far too clearly, his visions delivering him deep into a history better left lost. Knowledge had beaten him down *–as it does us all, when delivered in too great a measure. Yet I hunger still.*

Cairns had begun appearing, heaps of boulders surmounted with totemic skulls. *Not barrows,* List had said. *Sites of engagement, the various clans, wherever the Jaghut turned from flight and lashed out.*

The day was drawing to a close when they reached the final height, a broad, jumbled basolith that seemed to have shed its limestone coat, the exposed bedrock deeply hued the colour of wine. Flat, treeless stretches were crowded with boulders set out in spirals, ellipses and corridors. Cedars were replaced by pines, and the number of petrified trees diminished.

Duiker and List had been travelling in the last third of the column, the wounded shielded by a battered rearguard of infantry. Once the last of the wagons and the few livestock that remained cleared the slope and made

level ground, the footmen quickly gained the ridge, squads scattering to various vantage points and potential strongholds commanding the approach.

List halted his wagon and set the brake, then rose from the buckboard, stretched and looked down at Duiker with haunted eyes.

'Better lines of sight up here, anyway,' the historian offered.

'Always has been,' the corporal said. 'If we make for the head of the column, we'll come to the first of them.'

'The first of what?'

The blood leaving the lad's face bespoke another vision flooding his mind, a world and a time seen through unhuman eyes. After a moment he shuddered, wiping sweat from his face. 'I'll show you.'

They moved through the quiet press in silence. The efforts at making camp they saw on all sides looked wooden, refugees and soldiers alike moving as automatons. No-one bothered attempting to erect tents; they simply laid out their bedrolls on the flat rock. Children sat unmoving, watching with the eyes of old men and women.

The Wickan camps were no better. There was no escape from what had been, from the images and remembered scenes that rose again and again, remorselessly, before the mind's eye. Every frail, mundane gesture of normal life had shattered beneath the weight of knowledge.

Yet there was anger, white hot and buried deep, out of sight, as if mantled in peat. It had become the last fuel with any potency. *And so we move on, day after day, fighting every battle – those inside and those without – with an unyielding ferocity and determination. We are all in that place where Lull now lives, a place stripped of rational thought, trapped in a world without cohesion.*

Arriving at the vanguard, they came upon a scene. Coltaine, Bult and Captain Lull were present, and facing them in a ragged line ten paces away were the last of the Engineers.

The Fist turned as Duiker and List approached. 'Ah, this is well. I would have you witness this, Historian.'

'What have I missed?'

Bult grinned. 'Nothing; we've just managed the prodigious task of assembling the sappers – you'd think battles with Kamist Reloe were tactical nightmares. Anyway, here they are, looking like they're waiting to be ambushed, or worse.'

'And are they, Uncle?'

The commander's grin broadened. 'Maybe.'

Coltaine now stepped towards the assembled soldiers. 'Symbols of bravery and gestures of recognition can only ring hollow – this I know, yet what else is left to me? Three clan leaders have come to me, each begging to approach you men and women with an offer of formal adoption to their clan. Perhaps you are unaware of what such unprecedented requests reveal ... or perhaps, judging by your expressions, you know. I felt need to answer on your behalf, for I know more of you soldiers than do most Wickans, including those clan leaders, and they have each humbly withdrawn their requests.'

He was silent for a long moment.

'Nonetheless,' Coltaine finally continued, 'I would have you know, they meant to honour you.'

Ah, Coltaine, even you do not understand these soldiers well enough. Those scowls you see arrayed before you certainly look *like disapproval, disgust even, but then, when have you ever seen them smile?*

'So, I am left with the traditions of the Malazan Empire. There were enough witnesses at the Crossing to weave in detail the tapestry of your deeds, and among all of you, including your fallen comrades, the natural leadership of one was noted again and again. Without it, the day would have been truly lost.'

The sappers did not move, their scowls if anything deeper, more fierce.

Coltaine moved to stand before one man. Duiker recalled him well – a squat, hairless, immeasurably ugly sapper, his eyes thin slashes, his nose a flattened spread of angles and crooks. Audaciously, he wore fragments of armour that Duiker recognized as taken from a commander of the Apocalypse, though the helm tied to his belt was something that could have adorned an antique shop in Darujhistan. Another object that hung from his belt was difficult to identify, and it was a moment before the historian realized he was looking at the battered remnant of a shield: two reinforced grips behind a mangled plate-sized flap of bronze. A large, blackened crossbow hung from one shoulder, so covered and entwined with twigs, branches and other camouflage as to make it seem the man carried a bush.

'I believe the time has come,' Coltaine said, 'for a promotion. You are now a sergeant, soldier.'

The man said nothing, his eyes narrowing to the thinnest of slits.

'I think a salute would be appropriate,' Bult growled.

One of the other sappers cleared his throat and nervously yanked at his moustache.

Captain Lull rounded on the man. 'Got something to say about this, soldier?'

'Not much,' the man muttered.

'Out with it.'

The soldier shrugged. 'Well, only ... he was a captain not two minutes ago, sir. The Fist's just demoted him. That's Captain Mincer, sir. Commands the Engineers. Or did.'

Mincer finally spoke. 'And since I'm now a sergeant, I suggest the captaincy go to this soldier.' He reached out and grabbed the woman beside him by the ear to drag her close. 'What used to be *my* sergeant. Name's Bungle.'

Coltaine stared a moment longer, then swung around and met Duiker's eyes with such comic pleasure that the historian's exhaustion was simply

swept away, flashburned into oblivion. The Fist struggled to keep a straight face, and Duiker bit his lip in his own effort. His gaze caught on Lull, whose face showed the same struggle, even as the captain winked and mouthed three silent words.

Sleight of hand.

The question remained how Coltaine would now play it. Composing his face into stern regard, the Fist turned about again. He eyed Mincer, then the woman named Bungle. 'That will be fine, Sergeant,' he said. 'Captain Bungle, I would advise you to listen to your sergeant in all matters. Understood?'

The woman shook her head.

Mincer grimaced and said, 'She's no experience with that, Fist. I never asked *her* advice, I'm afraid.'

'From what I have gathered, you never asked anyone's advice when you were captain.'

'Aye, that's a fact.'

'Nor did you attend any staff briefings.'

'No, sir.'

'And why was that?'

Mincer shrugged.

Captain Bungle spoke. 'Beauty sleep, sir. That's what he always said.'

'Hood knows the man needs it,' Bult muttered.

Coltaine raised an eyebrow. 'And did he sleep, Captain? During those times?'

'Oh yes, sir. He sleeps when we march, too, sir. Sleeps while walking – I've never seen the like. Snoring away, sir, one foot in front of the other, a bag full of rocks on his back—'

'Rocks?'

'For when he breaks his sword, sir. He throws them, and there ain't a damned thing he can't hit.'

'Wrong,' Mincer growled. 'That lapdog ...'

Bult seemed to choke, then spat in sympathy.

Coltaine had drawn his hands behind him, and Duiker saw them clench in a white-knuckled grip. As if sensing that attention, the Fist called out without turning, 'Historian!'

'I am here, Fist.'

'You will record this?'

'Oh, aye, sir. Every blessed word.'

'Excellent. Engineers, you are dismissed.'

The group wandered off, muttering. One man clapped Mincer on the shoulder and received a blistering glare in return.

Coltaine watched them leave, then strode to Duiker, Bult and Lull following.

'Spirits below!' Bult hissed.

Duiker smiled. 'Your soldiers, Commander.'

'Aye,' he said, suddenly beaming with pride. 'Aye.'

'I did not know what to do,' Coltaine confessed.

Lull grunted. 'You played it perfectly, Fist. That was exquisite, no doubt already making the rounds as a Hood-damned full-blown legend. If they liked you before, they love you now, sir.'

The Wickan remained baffled. 'But why? I just demoted a man for unsurpassed bravery!'

'Returned him to the ranks, you mean. And that lifted every one of 'em up, don't you see that?'

'But Mincer—'

'Never had so much fun in his life, I'd bet. You can tell, when they get even uglier. Hood knows, I can't explain it – only sappers know a sapper's way of thinking and behaving, and sometimes not even them.'

'You've a captain named Bungle, now, nephew,' Bult said. 'Think she'll be there in polish and shine next briefing?'

'Not a chance,' Lull opined. 'She's probably packing her gear right now.'

Coltaine shook his head. 'They win,' he said, in evident wonder. 'I am defeated.'

Duiker watched the three men walk away, still discussing what had just happened. Not *lies after all. Tears and smiles, something so small, so absurd . . . the only possible answer. . .* The historian shook himself, and looked around until he found List. 'Corporal, I recall you had something to show me...'

'Yes, sir. Up ahead, not far, I think.'

They came to the ruined tower before reaching the forward outlying pickets. A squad of Wickans had commandeered the position, filling the ringed bedrock floor with supplies and leaving in attendance a lone, one-armed youth.

List laid a hand on one of the massive foundation stones. 'Jaghut,' he said. 'They lived apart, you know. No villages, no cities, just single, remote dwellings. Like this one.'

'Enjoyed their privacy, I take it.'

'They feared each other almost as much as they feared the T'lan Imass, sir.'

Duiker glanced over at the Wickan youth. The lad was fast asleep. *We're doing a lot of that these days. Just dropping off.* 'How old?' he asked the corporal.

'Not sure. A hundred, two, maybe even three.'

'Not years.'

'No. Millennia.'

'So, this is where the Jaghut lived.'

'The first tower. From here, pushed back, then again, then again. The final stand – the last tower – is in the heart of the plain beyond the forest.'

'Pushed back,' the historian repeated.

List nodded. 'Each siege lasted centuries, the losses among the T'lan Imass staggering. Jaghut were anything but wanderers. When they chose a place ...' His voice fell off. He shrugged.

'Was this a typical war, Corporal?'

The young man hesitated, then shook his head. 'A strange bond, unique among the Jaghut. When the mother was in peril, the children returned, joined the battle. Then the father. Things ... escalated.'

Duiker nodded, looked around. 'She must have been ... special.'

Tight-lipped and pale, List pulled off his helm, ran a hand through his sweaty hair. 'Aye,' he finally whispered.

'Is she your guide?'

'No. Her mate.'

Something made the historian turn, as if in answer to a barely felt shiver of air. North, through the trees, then above them. His mind struggled to encompass what he saw: a column, a spear lit gold, rising ... rising.

'Hood's breath!' List muttered. 'What is that?'

A lone word thundered through Duiker, flooding his mind, driving out every thought, and he knew with utter certainty the truth of it, the single word that was answer to List's question.

'Sha'ik.'

Kalam sat in his gloomy cabin, inundated with the sound of hammering waves and shrieking wind. *Ragstopper* shuddered with every remorseless crash of the raging seas, the room around the assassin pitching in, it seemed, a dozen directions at once.

Somewhere in their wake, a fast trader battled the same storm, and her presence – announced by the lookout only minutes before the green and strangely luminescent cloud rolled over them – gnawed at Kalam, refusing to go away. *The same fast trader we'd seen before. Was the answer a simple one? While we squatted in that shithole of a home port, she'd been calmly shouldering the Imperial pier at Falar, no special rush in resupplying when you have a shore leave worth the name.*

But that did not explain the host of other details that plagued the assassin – details that, each on their own, rang a minor note of discord, yet together they created a cacophony of alarm in Kalam. Blurred passages of time, perhaps born of the man's driving aspiration to complete this voyage, at war with the interminable reality of day upon day, night upon night, the very sameness of such a journey.

But no, there's more than just a conflict of perspective. The hour-glasses, the dwindled stores of food and fresh water, the captain's tortured hints of a world amiss aboard this damned ship.

And that fast trader, it should have sailed past us long ago . . .

Salk Elan. A mage – he stinks of it. Yet a sorcerer who could twist an entire crew's mind so thoroughly . . . that sorcerer would have to be a High Mage. Not impossible. Just highly unlikely among Mebra's covert circle of spies and agents.

There was no doubt in Kalam's mind that Elan had woven about himself a web of deceit, inasmuch as it was in such a man's nature to do so, whether necessary or not. Yet which strand should the assassin follow in his quest for the truth?

Time. How long has this journey been? Tradewinds where none should be, now a storm, driving us ever southeastward, a storm that had therefore not come from the ocean wastes – as the immutable laws of the sea would

demand – but from the Falari Isles. In its dry season – a season of unbroken calm.

So, who plays with us here? And what role does Salk Elan have in this game, if any?

Growling, the assassin rose from his bunk, grabbing in mid-swing his satchel from its hook, then made his rocking way to the door.

The hold was like a siege tower under a ceaseless barrage of rocks. Mist filled the salty, close air and the keel was awash in shin-deep water. There was no-one about, every hand committed to the daunting task of holding *Ragstopper* together. Kalam cleared a space and dragged a chest free. He rummaged in his satchel until his hand found and closed on a small, misshapen lump of stone. He drew it out and set it on the chest-top.

It did not roll off; indeed, it did not move at all.

The assassin unsheathed a dagger, reversed his grip, then drove the iron pommel down on the stone. It shattered. A gust of hot, dry air washed over Kalam. He crouched lower.

'Quick! Quick Ben, you bastard, now's the time!'

No voice reached him through the storm's incessant roar.

I'm beginning to hate mages. 'Quick Ben, damn you!'

The air seemed to waver, like streams of heat rising from a desert floor. A familiar voice tickled the assassin's ears. 'Any idea the last time I've had a chance to sleep? It's all gone to Hood's shithole over here, Kalam – where are you and what do you want? And hurry up with it – this is killing me!'

'I thought you were my shaved knuckle in the hole, damn you!'

'You in Unta? The palace? I never figured—'

'Thanks for the vote of confidence,' the assassin cut in. 'No, I'm not in the Hood-cursed palace, you idiot. I'm at sea—'

'Aren't we all. You've just messed up, Kalam – I can't do this more than once.'

'I know. So I'm on my own when I get there. Fine, nothing new in that. Listen, what can you sense of where I am at this moment? Something's gone seriously awry on this ship, and I want to know what, and who's responsible.'

'Is that all? OK, OK, give me a minute ...'

Kalam waited. The hair rose on his neck as he felt his friend's presence fill the air on all sides, a probing emanation that the assassin knew well. Then it was gone.

'Uh.'

'What does *that* mean, Quick?'

'You're in trouble, friend.'

'Laseen?'

'Not sure. Not directly – that ship stinks of a warren, Kalam, one of the rarest among mortals. Been confused lately, friend?'

'I was right, then! Who?'

'Someone, maybe on board, maybe not. Maybe sailing a craft within that warren, right alongside you, only you'll never see it. Anything valuable aboard?'

'You mean apart from my hide?'

'Yes, apart from your hide, of course.'

'Only a despot's ransom.'

'Ah, and someone wants it getting somewhere fast, and when it gets there that someone wants every damned person on board to forget where that place is. That's my guess, Kalam. I could be very wrong, though.'

'That's a comfort. You said you're in trouble over there? Whiskeyjack? Dujek, the squad?'

'Scraping through so far. How's Fiddler?'

'No idea. We decided on separate ways ...'

'Oh no, Kalam!'

'Aye, Tremorlor. Hood's breath, it was your idea, Quick!'

'Assuming the House was ... at peace. Sure, it should've worked. Absolutely. I think. But something's gone bad there – every warren's lit up, Kalam. Chanced on a Deck of Dragons lately?'

'No.'

'Lucky you.'

Realization struck the assassin with a sharply drawn breath. 'The Path of Hands...'

'The Path . .. oh.' The mage's voice rose, 'Kalam! If you knew—'

'We didn't *know* a damned thing, Quick!'

'They might have a chance,' Quick Ben muttered a moment later. 'With Sorry—'

'Apsalar, you mean.'

'Whatever. Let me think, damn you.'

'Oh, terrific,' Kalam growled. 'More schemes ...'

'I'm losing hold here, friend. Too tired . .. lost too much blood yesterday, I think. Mallet says ...'

The voice trailed away. Cool mist seeped back in around the assassin. Quick Ben was gone. *And that's that. On my own in truth, now. Fiddler . . .oh, you* bastard, *we should have guessed, figured it out. Ancient gates . . . Tremorlor.*

He did not move for a long time. Finally he sighed, wiped the top of the chest, removing the last of the crushed rock from its damp surface, and rose.

The captain was awake, and he had company. Salk Elan grinned as Kalam entered the cramped room. 'We were just talking about you, partner,' Elan said. 'Knowing how set you get in your mind, and wondering how you'd take the news ...'

'All right, I'll bite. What news?'

'This storm – we're being blown off course. A long way.'

'Meaning?'

'Seems we'll be making for a different port once it's spent.'

'Not Unta.'

'Oh, eventually, of course.'

The assassin's gaze fell to the captain. He looked unhappy, but resigned. Kalam conjured a map of Quon Tali in his mind, studied it a moment, then sighed. 'Malaz City. The island.'

'Never seen that legendary cesspool before,' Elan said. 'I can't wait. I trust you'll be generous enough to show me all the sights, friend.'

Kalam stared at the man, then smiled. 'Count on it, Salk Elan.'

They had paused for a rest, almost inured to the curdling cries and screams rising from other paths of the maze. Mappo lowered Icarium to the ground and knelt beside his unconscious friend. Tremorlor's desire for the Jhag was palpable. The Trell closed his eyes. The *Nameless Ones have guided us here, delivering Icarium to the Azath as they would a goat to a hill god. Yet it is not their hands that will be bloodied by the deed. I am the one who will be stained by this.*

He struggled to conjure the image of the destroyed town – his birthplace – but it was now haunted by shadows. Doubt had replaced conviction. He no longer believed his own memories. *Foolish! Icarium has taken countless lives. Whatever the truth behind my town's death . . .*

His hands clenched.

My *tribe – the shoulder-women – would not betray me. What weight can be placed on Icarium's dreams? The Jhag remembers nothing. Nothing real. His equanimity softens truth, blurs the edges . . . smears every colour, until the memory is daubed anew. Thus. It is lcarium's kindness that has snared me . . .*

Mappo's fists ached. He looked down at his companion, studied the expression of peaceful repose on the Jhag's blood-smeared face.

Tremorlor shall not have you. I am not to be so used. If the Nameless Ones would deliver you, then they shall have to come for you themselves, and through me first.

He looked up, glared into the heart of the maze. *Tremorlor. Reach for him with your roots, and they shall feel the rage of a Trell warrior, his battle dream unleashed, ancient spirits riding his flesh in a dance of murder. This I promise, and so you are warned.*

'It's said,' Fiddler murmured beside him, 'that the Azath have taken gods.'

Mappo fixed the soldier with hooded eyes.

Fiddler squinted as he studied the riotous walls on all sides. 'What Elder gods – their names forgotten for millennia – are caged here? When did they last see light? When were they last able to move their limbs? Can you imagine an eternity thus endured?' He shifted the weight of the crossbow in his hands. 'If Tremorlor dies. .. imagine the madness unleashed upon the world.'

The Trell was silent for a moment, then he whispered, 'What are these darts that you fling at me?'

Fiddler's brows rose. 'Darts? None intended. This place sits on me like a cloak of vipers, that is all.'

'Tremorlor has no hunger for you, soldier.'

Fiddler's grin was crooked. 'Sometimes it pays being a nobody.'

'Now you mock in truth.'

The sapper's grin fell away. 'Widen your senses, Trell. Tremorlor's is not the only hunger here. Every prisoner in these walls of wood feels our passage. They might well flinch from you and Icarium, but no such fear constrains their regard for the rest of us.'

Mappo looked away. 'Forgive me. I've spared little thought for anyone else, as you have noted. Still, do not think I would hesitate in defending you if the need arose. I am not one to diminish the honour that is your companionship.'

Fiddler gave a sharp nod, straightened. 'A soldier's pragmatism. I had to know one way or the other.'

'I understand.'

'Sorry if I offended you.'

'Naught but a knife-tip's prod – you've stirred me to wakefulness.'

Iskaral Pust, squatting a few paces away, sputtered. 'Muddy the puddle, oh yes! Yank his loyalties this way and that – excellent! Witness the strategy of silence – while the intended victims unravel each other in pointless, divisive discourse. Oh yes, I have learned much from Tremorlor, and so assume a like strategy. Silence, a faint mocking smile suggesting I know more than I do, an air of mystery, yes, and fell knowledge. None could guess my confusion, my host of deluded illusions and elusive delusions! A mantle of marble hiding a crumbling core of sandstone. See how they stare at me, wondering – all wondering – at my secret wellspring of wisdom ...'

'Let's kill him,' Crokus muttered, 'if only to put him out of our misery.'

'And sacrifice such entertainment?' Fiddler growled. He resumed his place at point. 'Time to go.'

'The blathering of secrets,' the High Priest of Shadow uttered in a wholly different voice, 'so they judge me ineffectual.'

The others spun to face him.

Iskaral Pust offered a beatific smile.

A swarm of wasps rose above the tangled root wall, sped over their heads and past – paying them no heed. Fiddler felt his heart thud back into place. He drew a shuddering breath. There were some D'ivers that he feared more than others. Beasts *are one thing, but insects. . .*

He glanced back at the others. Icarium hung limp in Mappo's arms. The Jhag's head was stained with blood. The Trell's gaze reached beyond the sapper to the edifice that awaited them. Mappo's expression was twisted with anguish, so thoroughly unmasked and vulnerable that the Trell's face was a child's face, with an attendant need that was all the more demanding for being wholly unconscious. A mute appeal that was difficult to resist.

Fiddler shook himself, pushing his attention past Mappo and his burden. Apsalar, her father and Crokus stood ranged behind the Trell in a protective cordon while beyond them were the Hounds and Iskaral Pust. Five pairs of bestial eyes and one human burned with intent – *dubious allies, our rearguard. Talk about a badly timed schism* – and that intent was fixed on the unconscious body in Mappo's arms.

Icarium himself wished it, and in so saying rendered the Trell's heart. The price of acquiescence is as nothing to the pain of refusal. Yet Mappo will surrender his life to this, and we're likely to do the same. None of us – not *even Apsalar – is cold-hearted enough to stand back, to see the Jhag taken.* Hood's *breath, we are fools, and Mappo the greatest fool of us all. . .*

'What's on your mind, Fid?' Crokus asked, his tone suggesting he had a pretty good idea.

'Sappers got a saying,' he muttered. 'Wide-eyed stupid.'

The Daru slowly nodded.

In other paths of the maze, the taking had begun. Shapeshifters – the most powerful of them, the survivors who'd made it this far – had begun their assault on the House of the Azath. A cacophony of screams echoed in the air, battering their senses. Tremorlor defended itself the only way it could, by devouring, by imprisoning – *but there are too many, coming too quickly*

– wood snapped, woven cages shattered, the sound was of a forest being destroyed, branch by branch, tree by tree, an inexorable progression, closer, ever closer to the House itself.

'We're running out of time!' hissed Iskaral Pust, the Hounds moving in agitation around him. 'Things are coming up behind us. Things! How much clearer can I be?'

'We may still need him,' Fiddler said.

'Oh, aye!' the High Priest responded. 'The Trell can throw him like a sack of grain!'

'I can bring him around quickly enough,' Mappo growled. 'I still carry some of those Denul elixirs from your temple, Iskaral Pust.'

'Let's get moving,' the sapper said. Something was indeed coming up behind them, making the air redolent with sickly spice. The Hounds had pulled their attention from Mappo and Icarium and now faced the other way, revealing restless nerves as they shifted position. The trail made a sharp bend twenty paces from where the huge beasts stood.

A piercing scream ripped the air, coming from just beyond that bend, followed by the explosive sounds of battle. It ended abruptly.

'We've waited too long!' Pust hissed, cowering behind his god's Hounds. 'Now it comes!'

Fiddler swung his crossbow around, eyes fixed on the place where their pursuer would appear.

Instead, a small, nut-brown creature half flapped, half scampered into view. Tendrils of smoke drifted from it.

'Ai!' Pust shrieked. 'They plague me!'

Crokus bolted forward, pushing his way between Shan and Gear as if they were no more than a pair of mules. 'Moby?'

The familiar raced towards the Daru and leapt at the last moment to land in the lad's arms. Where it clung tenaciously, wings twitching. Crokus's

head snapped back. 'Ugh, you stink like the Abyss!'

Moby, that damned familiar. . . Fiddler's gaze flicked to Mappo. The Trell was frowning.

'Bhok'aral!' The word came from Iskaral Pust as a curse. 'A pet? A pet? Madness!'

'My uncle's familiar,' Crokus said, approaching.

The Hounds shrank from his path.

Oh, lad, much more than that, it seems.

'An ally, then,' Mappo said.

Crokus nodded, though with obvious uncertainty. 'Hood knows how he found us. How he survived ...'

'Dissembler!' Pust accused, creeping towards the Daru. 'A familiar? Shall we ask the opinion of that dead shapeshifter back there? Oh no, we can't, can we? *It's been torn to pieces!*'

Crokus said nothing.

'Never mind,' Apsalar said. 'We're wasting time. To the House—'

The High Priest wheeled on her. 'Never mind? What conniving deceit has arrived among us? What foul betrayal hangs over us? There, hanging from the lad's shirt—'

'Enough!' Fiddler snapped. 'Stay here then, Pust. You and your Hounds.' The sapper faced the House again. 'What do you think, Mappo? Nothing's got close to it yet – if we make a run for it...'

'We can but try.'

'Do you think the door will open for us?'

'I do not know.'

'Let's find out, then.'

The Trell nodded.

They had a clear view of Tremorlor. A low wall surrounded it, made of what appeared to be volcanic rock, jagged and sharp. The only visible break in that wall was a narrow gate, over which arched a weave of vines. The House itself was tawny in colour, probably built of limestone, its entrance recessed between a pair of squat, asymmetrical two-storey towers, neither of which possessed windows. A winding path of flagstones connected the gate with the shadow-swallowed door. Low, gnarled trees occupied the yard, each surmounting a hump.

A sister to Deadhouse in Malaz City. Little different from the one in Darujhistan. All of a kind. All Azath – though where that name came from and how long ago no-one knows or will ever know.

Mappo spoke in a low voice beside the sapper. 'It's said the Azath bridge the realms – every realm. It's said that even time itself ceases within their walls.'

'And those doors open to but a few, for reasons unknown.' Fiddler scowled at his own words.

Apsalar moved to the front, stepping past the sapper.

Startled, Fiddler grunted. 'In a hurry, lass?'

She looked back at him. 'The one who possessed me, Fiddler ... an Azath welcomed him, once.'

True enough. And why does that make me so nervous now, and here? 'So, how's it done? Special knock? Key under the loose flagstone?'

Her answering smile was a balm to his agitation. 'No, something much simpler. Audacity.'

'Well, we've plenty of that. We're here, aren't we?'

'Aye, we are.'

She led the way, and all followed.

'That conch shell,' Mappo rumbled. 'Immense damage was delivered to the Soletaken and D'ivers, is still being delivered, it seems – for the Azath,

it may be proving enough.'

'And you pray that is so.'

'Aye, I do.'

'So why didn't that deathly song destroy us as well?'

'You are asking me, Fiddler? The gift was given to you, was it not?'

'Yes. I saved a little girl – kin to the Spiritwalker.'

'Which Spiritwalker, Fiddler?'

'Kimloc'

The Trell was silent for half a dozen paces, then a frustrated growl rose from him. 'A girl, you said. No matter how close a kin, Kimloc's reward far outweighed your gesture. More, it seemed precisely intended for its use – the sorcery in that song was aspected, Fiddler. Tell me, did Kimloc know you sought Tremorlor?'

'I certainly didn't tell him as much.'

'Did he touch you at any time – the brush of a finger against your arm, anything?'

'He asked to, as I recall. He wanted my story. I declined. But Hood's breath, Mappo, I truly cannot recall if there was some chance contact.'

'I think there must have been.'

'If so, I forgive him the indiscretion.'

'I imagine he anticipated that as well.'

Even as Tremorlor withstood the assault that raged from all sides, the battles were far from over, and in some places the sound of shattering wood was a seemingly unstoppable progression, coming ever closer.

Apsalar increased pace as one of those unseen, sundering avalanches drew near the group, driving for the arched gate. A moment later, amidst a rising roar, they all broke into a run.

'Where?' Fiddler demanded as he scrambled forward, head darting as he searched frantically in all directions. 'Where in Hood's name is it?'

The answer came in a sudden sleet of ice-cold water from above, the savage opening of a warren. Emerging from within that hovering, strangely suspended spray – not fifty paces behind them – the enormous head and maw of a dhenrabi lunged into view, wreathed in uprooted sea grasses, kelp and strange, skeletal branches.

A swarm of wasps rose before it and was devoured entire without pause.

Three more dhenrabi appeared from that torrential portal. The roiling spume of water that held them seemed to burn off wherever it descended upon the roots of the maze, yet the creatures remained suspended, riding the hissing maelstrom.

Images flashed through Fiddler within the span of a single heartbeat. *Kansu Sea. Not a Soletaken after all – not a single beast, but a pack. A D'ivers. And I'm out of cussers—*

A moment later, it became clear just how untested the Hounds of Shadow had been thus far. He *felt* the power emanate from the five beasts – so similar was it to that of dragons, it rolled like a breath, a surge of raw sorcery that preceded the Hounds as they sprang forward with blurring speed.

Shan was the first to reach the lead dhenrabi, the first to plunge into its gaping, serrated mouth – and vanish within that yawning darkness. The creature reared back lightning-quick, and if that massive, blunt visage could show surprise, it did so now.

Gear reached the next one, and the dhenrabi lunged, not to swallow, but to bite down, to flense with the thousand jagged plates of its teeth. The Hound's power buckled under those snapping jaws, but did not shatter. An instant later, Gear was through, past those teeth, burying itself within the creature – where it delivered mayhem.

The other Hounds made for the remaining two dhenrabi. Only Blind remained with the group.

The lead dhenrabi began thrashing now, whipping its enormous bulk as the torrent of its warren collapsed around it – crushing flat walls of the maze, where long-imprisoned victims stirred amidst the wreckage, withered limbs reaching skyward through mud-churned water, clutching air. The second dhenrabi fell into the same writhing tumult.

A hand clutched Fiddler's arm, pulling him hard around.

'Come on,' Crokus hissed. Moby was still clinging to his shirt. 'We've got more company, Fid.'

And now the sapper saw the object of the Dam's attention – off to his right, almost behind Tremorlor, still a thousand paces distant, yet fast approaching. A swarm like no other. Bloodflies, in a solid black cloud the size of a thunderhead, billowing, surging towards them.

Leaving the dhenrabi in the throes of violent death behind them, the group sprinted for the House.

As he passed beneath the leafless arch of vines, the sapper saw Apsalar reach the door, close her hands on the broad, heavy ring-latch and twist it. He saw the muscles rise on her forearms, straining. Straining.

Then she staggered back a step, as if dismissively, contemptuously shoved. As Fiddler, trailed by Crokus, Mappo with his charge, Apsalar's father, then Pust and Blind, reached the flat, paved landing, he saw her spin round, her expression one of shock and disbelief.

It won't open. Tremorlor has refused us.

The sapper skidded to a halt, whirled.

The sky was black, alive, and coming straight for them.

At Vathar's sparse, blistered edge, where the basolith of bedrock sank once more beneath its skin of limestone, and the land that stretched southward before and below their vantage point was nothing but studded stones in windswept, parched clay, they came upon the first of the Jaghut tombs.

Few among the outriders and the column's head paid it much attention. It looked like nothing more than a cairn marker, a huge, elongated slab of stone tilted upward at the southernmost end, as if pointing the way across the Nenoth Odhan to Aren or some other, more recent destination.

Corporal List had led the historian to it in silence while the others prepared rigging to assist in the task of guiding the wagons down the steep, winding descent to the plain's barren floor.

'The youngest son,' List said, staring down at the primitive tomb. His face was frightening to look at, for it wore a father's grief, as raw as if the child's death was but yesterday – a grief that had, if anything, grown with the tortured, unfathomable passage of two hundred thousand years.

He stands guard still, that Jaghut ghost. The statement, a silent utterance that was both simple and obvious, nevertheless took the historian's breath away. *How to comprehend this . . .*

'How old?' Duiker's voice was as parched as the Odhan that awaited them.

'Five. The T'lan Imass chose this place for him. The effort of killing him would have proved too costly, given that the rest of the family still awaited them. So they dragged the child here – shattered his bones, every one, as many times as they could on so small a frame – then pinned him beneath this rock.'

Duiker had thought himself beyond shock, beyond even despair, yet his throat closed up at List's toneless words. The historian's imagination was too sharp for this, raising images in his mind that seared him with overwhelming sorrow. He forced himself to look away, watched the activities among the soldiers and Wickans thirty paces distant. He realized that they worked mostly in silence, speaking only as their tasks required, and then in low, strangely subdued tones.

'Yes,' List said. 'The father's emotions are a pall unrelieved by time – so powerful, so rending, those emotions, that even the earth spirits had to flee. It was that or madness. Coltaine should be informed – we must move quickly across this land.'

'And ahead? On the Nenoth plain?'

'It gets worse. It was not just the children that the T'lan Imass pinned – still breathing, still aware – beneath rocks.'

'But why?' The question ripped from Duiker's throat.

'Pogroms need no reason, sir, none that can weather challenge, in any case. Difference in kind is the first recognition, the only one needed, in fact. Land, domination, pre-emptive attacks – all just excuses, mundane justifications that do nothing but disguise the simple distinction. They are not us. We are not them.'

'Did the Jaghut seek to reason with them, Corporal?'

'Many times, among those not thoroughly corrupted by power – the Tyrants – but you see, there was always an arrogance in the Jaghut, and it was a kind that could claw its way up your back when face to face. Each Jaghut's interest was with him or herself. Almost exclusively. They viewed the T'lan Imass no differently from the way they viewed ants underfoot, herds on the grasslands, or indeed the grass itself. Ubiquitous, a feature of the landscape. A powerful, emergent people, such as the T'lan Imass were, could not but be stung—'

'To the point of swearing a deathless vow?'

'I don't believe that, at first, the T'lan Imass realized how difficult the task of eradication would be. Jaghut were very different in another way – they did not flaunt their power. And many of their efforts in self-defence were ... passive. Barriers of ice – glaciers – they swallowed the lands around them, even the seas, swallowed whole continents, making them impassable, unable to support the food the mortal Imass required.'

'So they created a ritual that would make them immortal—'

'Free to blow like the dust – and in the age of ice, there was plenty of dust.'

Duiker's gaze caught Coltaine standing near the edge of the trail. 'How far,' he asked the man beside him, 'until we leave this area of... of sorrow?'

'Two leagues, no more than that. Beyond are Nenoth's true grasslands, hills . . . tribes, each one very protective of what little water they possess.'

'I think I had better speak with Coltaine.'

'Aye, sir.'

The Dry March, as it came to be called, was its own testament to sorrow. Three vast, powerful tribes awaited them, two of them, the Tregyn and the Bhilard, striking at the beleaguered column like vipers. With the third, situated at the very western edge of the plains – the Khundryl – there was no immediate contact, though it was felt that that would not last.

The pathetic herd accompanying the Chain of Dogs died on that march, animals simply collapsing, even as the Wickan cattle-dogs converged with fierce insistence that they rise – dead or no – and resume the journey. When butchered, these carcasses were little more than ropes of leathery flesh.

Starvation joined the terrible ravaging thirst, for the Wickans refused to slaughter their horses and attended them with eloquent fanaticism that no-one dared challenge. The warriors sacrificed of themselves to keep their mounts alive. One petition from Nethpara's Council, offering to purchase a hundred horses, was returned to the noble-born leader smeared in human excrement.

The twin vipers struck again and again, contesting every league, the attacks increasing in ferocity and frequency, until it was clear that a major clash approached, only days away.

In the column's wake followed Korbolo Dom's army, a force that had grown with the addition of forces from Tarxian and other coastal settlements, and was now at least five times the size of Coltaine's Seventh and his Wickan clans. The renegade commander's measured pursuit – leaving engagement to the wild plains tribes – was ominous in itself.

He would be there for the imminent battle, without doubt, and was content to wait until then.

The Chain of Dogs – its numbers swollen by new refugees fleeing Bylan – crawled on, coming within sight of what the maps indicated was the Nenoth Odhan's end, where hills rose in a wall aross the southern horizon. The trader track cut through the only substantial passage, a wide river valley between the Bylan'sh Hills to the east and the Saniphir Hills to the west, the track running for seven leagues, opening out on a plain that faced the ancient tel of Sanimon, then wrapped around it to encompass the Sanith Odhan and, beyond that, the Geleen Plain, the Dojal Odhan – and the city of Aren itself.

No relief army emerged from Sanimon Valley. A profound sense of isolation descended like a shroud on the train, even as the valley's flanking hills began to reveal, in the day's dying light, twin encampments, both vast, of tribesmen – the main forces of the Tregyn and the Bhilard.

Here, then, at the mouth of the ancient valley ... here it would be.

'We're dying,' Lull muttered as he came up alongside the historian on his way to the briefing. 'And I don't mean just figuratively, old man. I lost eleven soldiers today. Throats swollen so bad with thirst they couldn't draw breath.' He waved at a fly buzzing his face. 'Hood's breath, I'm swimming in this armour – by the time we're done, we'll all look like T'lan Imass.'

'I can't say I appreciate the analogy, Captain.'

'Wasn't expecting you to.'

'Horse piss. That's what the Wickans are drinking these days.'

'Aye, same for my crew. They're neighing in their sleep, and more than one's died from it.'

Three dogs loped past them, the huge one named Bent, a female, and the lapdog scrambling in their wake.

'They'll outlive us all,' Lull grumbled. 'Those damned beasts!'

The sky deepened overhead, the first stars pushing through the cerulean gauze.

'Gods, I'm tired.'

Duiker nodded. *Oh, indeed, we've travelled far, friend, and now stand face to face with Hood. He takes the weary as readily as the defiant. Offers the same welcoming grin.*

'Something in the air tonight, Historian. Can you feel it?'

'Yes.'

'Maybe Hood's Warren has drawn closer.'

'It has that feel, doesn't it?'

They arrived at the Fist's command tent, entered.

The usual faces were arrayed before them. Nil and Nether, the last remaining warlocks; Sulmar and Chenned, Bult and Coltaine himself. Each had become a desiccated mockery of the will and strength once present in their varied miens.

'Where's Bungle?' Lull asked, finding his usual camp-chair.

'Listening to her sergeant, I'd guess,' Bult said, with a ghost of a grin.

Coltaine had no time for idle talk. 'Something approaches, this night. The warlocks have sensed it, though that is all they can say. We are faced with preparing for it.'

Duiker looked to Nether. 'What kind of sense?'

She shrugged, then sighed. 'Vague. Troubled, even outrage – I don't know, Historian.'

'Sensed anything like it before? Even remotely?'

'No.'

Outrage.

'Draw the refugees close,' Coltaine commanded the captains. 'Double the pickets—'

'Fist,' Sulmar said, 'we face a battle tomorrow—'

'Aye, and rest is needed. I know.' The Wickan began pacing, but it was a slower pace than usual. It had lost its smoothness as well, its ease and elegance. 'And more, we are greatly weakened – the water casks are bone dry.'

Duiker winced. *Battle? No, tomorrow will see a slaughter. Soldiers unable to fight, unable to defend themselves.* The historian cleared his throat, made to speak, then stopped. *One word, yet even to voice it would be to offer the cruellest illusion. One word.*

Coltaine was staring at him. 'We cannot,' he said softly.

I know. For the rebellion's warriors as much as for us, the end to this must *be with blood.*

'The soldiers are beyond digging trenches,' Lull said into the heavy, all-too-aware silence.

'Holes, then.'

'Aye, sir.'

Holes. To break mounted charges, snap legs, send screaming beasts into the dust.

The briefing ended then, abruptly, as the air was suddenly charged, and whatever threatened to arrive now announced itself with a brittle crackle, a mist of something oily, like sweat clogging the air.

Coltaine led the group outside, to find the bristling atmosphere manifested tenfold beneath the night's sparkling canopy. Horses bucked. Cattle-dogs howled.

Soldiers were rising like spectres. Weapons rustled.

In the open space just beyond the foremost pickets, the air split asunder with a savage, ripping sound.

Three pale horses thundered from that rent, followed by three more, then another three, all harnessed, all screaming with terror. Behind them came a massive carriage, a fire-scorched, gaudily painted leviathan riding atop six

spoked wheels that were taller than a man. Smoke trailed like thick strands of raw wool from the carriage, from the horses themselves, and from the three figures visible behind the last three chargers.

The white, screaming train was at full gallop – as if in headlong flight from whatever warren it had come from – and the carriage pitched wildly, alarmingly, as the beasts plunged straight for the pickets.

Wickans scattered to either side.

Staring with disbelief, Duiker saw all three figures sawing the reins, bellowing, flinging themselves against the backrest of their tottering perch.

The horses drove hooves into the earth, biting down on their momentum, the towering carriage slewing behind them, raising a cloud of smoke, dust and an emanation that the historian recognized with a jolt of alarm as *outrage*. The outrage, he now understood, of a warren – and its god.

Behind the lead carriage came another, then another, each pitching to one side or the other to avoid collision as they skidded to a halt.

As soon as the lead carriage ceased its headlong plunge, figures poured from it, armoured men and women, shouting, roaring commands that no-one seemed to pay any attention to, and waving blackened, smeared and dripping weapons.

A moment later, even as the other two carriages stopped, a loud bell clanged.

The frenzied, seemingly aimless activities of the figures promptly ceased. Weapons were lowered, and sudden silence filled the air behind the fading echo of the bell. Snorting and stamping, the lathered horses tossed their heads, ears twitching, nostrils wide.

The lead carriage was no more than fifteen paces from where Duiker and the others stood.

The historian saw a severed hand clinging to an ornate projection on one side of the carriage. After a moment it fell to the ground.

A tiny barred door opened and a man emerged, with difficulty squeezing his considerable bulk through the aperture. He was dressed in silks that were drenched in sweat. His round, glistening face revealed the passing echoes of some immense, all-consuming effort. In one hand he carried a stoppered bottle.

Stepping clear, he faced Coltaine and raised the bottle. 'You, sir,' he said in strangely accented Malazan, 'have much to answer for.' Then he grinned, displaying a row of gold-capped, diamond-studded teeth. 'Your exploits tremble the warrens! Your journey is wildfire in every street in Darujhistan, no doubt in every city, no matter how distant! Have you no notion how many beseech their gods on your behalf? Coffers overflow! Grandiose plans of salvation abound! Vast organizations have formed, their leaders coming to us, to the Trygalle Trade Guild, to pay for our fraught passage – though,' he added in a lower tone, 'all the Guild's passages are fraught, which is what makes us so expensive.' He unstoppered the bottle. 'The great city of Darujhistan and its remarkable citizens – dismissing in an instant your Empire's voracious desires on it and on themselves – bring you this gift! By way of the shareholders –' he waved back at the various men and women behind him, now gathering into a group – 'of Trygalle – the foulest-tempered, greediest creatures imaginable, but that is neither here nor there, for here we are, are we not? Let it not be said of the citizens of Darujhistan that they are insensitive to the wondrous, and, dear sir, you are truly wondrous.'

The preposterous man stepped forward, suddenly solemn. He spoke softly. 'Alchemists, mages, sorcerers have all contributed, offering vessels with capacities belying their modest containers. Coltaine of Crow Clan, Chain of Dogs, I bring you food. I bring you water.'

Karpolan Demesand was one of the original founders of the Trygalle Trade Guild, a citizen of the small fortress city of the same name, situated south of the Lamatath Plain on the continent of Genabackis. Born of a dubious alliance between a handful of mages, Karpolan among them, and the city's benefactors – a motley collection of retired pirates and wreckers – the Guild

came to specialize in expeditions so risk-laden as to make the average merchant pale. Each caravan was protected by a heavily armed company of shareholders – guards who possessed a direct stake in the venture, ensuring the fullest exploitation of their abilities. And such abilities were direly needed, for the caravans of the Trygalle Trade Guild – as was clear from the very outset – travelled the warrens.

'We knew we had a challenge on our hands,' Karpolan Demesand said with a beatific, glittering smile as they sat in Coltaine's command tent, with only the Fist and Duiker for company because everyone else was working outside, dispensing the caravan's life-giving supplies with all speed. 'That foul Wan-en of Hood is wrapped about you tighter than a funeral shroud on a corpse ... if you'll forgive the image. The key is to ride fast, to stop for nothing, then get out as soon as humanly possible. In the lead wagon, I maintain the road, with every sorcerous talent at my command – a gruelling journey, granted, but then again, we don't come cheap.'

'I still find it hard to fathom,' Duiker said, 'that the citizens of Darujhistan, fifteen hundred leagues distant, should even know of what's happening here, much less care.'

Karpolan's eyes thinned. 'Ah, well, perhaps I exaggerated somewhat – the heat of the moment, I confess. You must understand – soldiers who not long ago were bent on conquering Darujhistan are now locked in a war with the Pannion 'Domin, a tyranny that would dearly love to swallow the Blue City if it could. Dujek Onearm, once Fist of the Empire and now outlaw to the same, has become an ally. And this, certain personages in Darujhistan know well, and appreciate...'

'But there is more to it,' Coltaine said quietly.

Karpolan smiled a second time. 'Is this water not sweet? Here, let me pour you another cup.'

They waited, watching the trader refill the three tin cups arrayed on the small table between them. When he was done, Karpolan sighed and sat back in the plush chair he had had removed from the carriage. 'Dujek Onearm.' The name was spoken half in benediction, half in wry dismay. 'He

sends his greetings, Fist Coltaine. Our office in Darujhistan is small, newly opened, you understand. We do not advertise our services. Not openly, in any case. Frankly, those services include activities that are, on occasion, clandestine in nature. We trade not only in material goods but in information, the delivery of gifts, of people themselves ... and other creatures.'

'Dujek Onearm was the force behind this mission,' Duiker said.

Karpolan nodded. 'With financial assistance from a certain cabal in Darujhistan, yes. His words were thus: "The Empress cannot lose such leaders as Coltaine of the Crow Clan."' The trader grinned. 'Extraordinary for an outlaw under a death sentence, wouldn't you say?' He leaned forward and held out a hand, palm up. Something shimmered into existence on it, a small oblong bottle of smoky grey glass on a silver chain. 'And, from an alarmingly mysterious mage among the Bridgeburners, this gift was fashioned.' He held it out to Coltaine. 'For you. Wear it. At all times, Fist.'

The Wickan scowled and made no move to accept it.

Karpolan's smile was wistful. 'Dujek is prepared to pull rank on this, friend—'

'An outlaw pulling rank?'

Ah, well, I admit I voiced the same query. His reply was this: "Never underestimate the Empress."'

Silence descended, the meaning behind that statement slowly taking shape. *Locked in a war against an entire continent . . . stumbling onto a recognition of an even greater threat – the Pannion Domin . . . shall the Empire alone fight on behalf of a hostile land? Yet . . . how to fashion allies among enemies, how to unify against a greater threat with the minimum of fuss and mistrust? Outlaw your occupying army, so they've 'no choice' but to step free of Laseen's shadow. Dujek, ever loyal Dujek – even the ill-conceived plan of killing the last of the Old* Guard – *Tayschrenn's foolishness and misguided idea – insufficient to turn him. So now he has allies – those who were once his enemies – perhaps even Caladan Brood*

and Anomander Rake themselves . . . Duiker turned to Coltaine and saw the same knowledge there in his drawn, stern visage.

The Wickan reached out and received the gift.

'The Empress *must not* lose you, Fist. Wear it, sir. Always. And when the time comes, break it – against your own chest. Even if it's your last act, though I suggest you do not leave it until then. Such were its creator's frantic instructions.' Karpolan grinned again. 'And such a man, that creator! A dozen Ascendants would dearly love his head served up on a plate, his eyes pickled, his tongue skewered and roasted with peppers, his ears grilled —'

'Your point is made,' Duiker cut in.

Coltaine placed the chain around his neck and slipped the bottle beneath his buckskin shirt.

'A dire battle awaits you come dawn,' Karpolan said after a time. 'I cannot stay, will not stay. Though mage of the highest order, though merchant of ruthless cunning, I admit to a streak of sentimentality, gentlemen. I will not stand witness to this tragedy. More, we have one more delivery to make before we begin our return journey, and its achievement shall demand all of my skills, indeed, may exhaust them.'

'I had never before heard of your Guild, Karpolan,' Duiker said, 'but I would hear more of your adventures, some day.'

'Perhaps the opportunity will arise, Historian. For now, I hear my shareholders gathering, and I must see to reviving and quelling the horses – although, it must be said, they seem to have acquired a thirst for wild terror. No different from us, eh?' He rose.

'My thanks to you,' Coltaine growled, 'and your shareholders.'

'Have you a word for Dujek Onearm, Fist?'

The Wickan's response startled Duiker, slipping a rough blade of suspicion into him that would remain, nagging and fearful.

'No.'

Karpolan's eyes widened momentarily, then he nodded. 'We must be gone, alas. May your enemy pay dearly come the morrow, Fist.'

'They shall.'

Sudden bounty could not affect complete rejuvenation, but the army that rose with the dawn revealed a calm readiness that Duiker had not seen since Gelor Ridge.

The refugees remained tightly packed in a basin just north of the valley mouth. The Weasel and Foolish Dog clans guarded the position, situating themselves along a rise that faced the assembled forces of Korbolo Dom. More than thirty rebel soldiers stood ready to challenge each and every Wickan horsewarrior, and the inevitable outcome of that clash was so obvious, so brutally clear, that panic ripped through the massed refugees in waves, hopeless rippling surges this way and that, and wails of despair filled the dust-laden air above them.

Coltaine sought to drive through the tribesmen blocking the valley mouth, and do so quickly, and he thus concentrated his Crow Clan and most of the Seventh at the front. A fast, shattering breakthrough offered the only hope for the rearguard clans, and indeed for the refugees themselves.

Duiker sat on his emaciated mare, positioned on a low rise sightly to the east of the main track where he could just make out the two Wickan clans to the north – Korbolo Dom's army somewhere unseen beyond them.

The carriages of the Trygalle Trade Guild had departed, vanishing with the last minutes of darkness before the eastern horizon began its pale awakening.

Corporal List rode up, reining in beside the historian. 'A fine morning, sir!' he said. 'The season is turning – change rides the air – can you feel it?'

Duiker eyed the man. 'One as young as you should not be so cheerful this day, Corporal.'

'Nor one as old as you so dour, sir.'

'Hood-damned upstart, is this what familiarity breeds?'

List grinned, which was answer enough.

Duiker's eyes narrowed. 'And what has your Jaghut ghost whispered to you, List?'

'Something he himself never possessed, Historian. Hope.'

'Hope? How, from where? Does Pormqual finally approach?'

'I don't know about that, sir. You think it's possible?'

'No, I do not.'

'Nor I, sir.'

'Then what in Fener's hairy balls are you going on about, List?'

'Not sure, sir. I simply awoke feeling ...' he shrugged, 'feeling as if we'd just been blessed, god-touched, or something . ..'

'A fine enough way to meet our last dawn,' Duiker muttered, sighing.

The Tregyn and Bhilard tribes were readying themselves, but the sudden blaring of horns from the Seventh made it clear that Coltaine was not interested in the courtesy of awaiting them. The Crow lancers and mounted archers surged forward, up the gentle slope towards the eastern hill of the Bhilard.

'Historian!'

Something in the corporal's tone brought Duiker around. List was paying no attention to the Crow's advance – he faced the northwest, where another tribe's riders had just appeared, spreading out as they rode closer in numbers of appalling vastness.

'The Khundryl,' Duiker said. 'Said to be the most powerful tribe south of Vathar – as we can now acknowledge.'

Horse hooves thundered towards the rise and they turned to see Coltaine himself approach. The Fist's expression was impassive, almost calm as he stared northwestward.

Clashes had begun at the rearguard position – the day's first drawing of blood, most of it likely to be Wickan. Already the refugees had begun pushing southward, in the hope that will alone could see the valley prised open.

The Khundryl, in the tens of thousands, formed two distinct masses, one directly west of Sanimon's mouth, the other farther to the north, on a flank of Korbolo Dom's army. Between these two was a small knot of war chiefs, who now rode directly towards the rise where sat Duiker, List and Coltaine.

'Looks like personal combat is desired, Fist,' Duiker said. 'We'd best ride back.'

'No.'

The historian's head turned. Coltaine had uncouched his lance and was readying his black-feathered round shield on his left forearm.

'Damn you, Fist – this is madness!'

'Watch your tongue, Historian,' the Wickan said distractedly.

Duiker's gaze fixed on the short stretch of silver chain visible around the man's neck. 'Whatever that gift is that you're wearing, it'll only work once. What you do now is what a war chief of the Wickans would, but not a Fist of the Empire.'

The man snapped around at that and the historian found the barbed point of the lance pricking his throat.

'And just when,' Coltaine rasped, 'can I choose to die in the manner I desire? You think I will use this cursed bauble?' Freeing his shield hand, he reached up and tore the chain from his neck. 'You wear it, Historian. All that we have done avails the world naught, unless the tale is told. Hood take Dujek Onearm! Hood take the Empress!' He flung the bottle at Duiker and it struck unerringly the palm of his right hand. Fingers closing around the object, he felt the serpentine slither of chain against calluses. The lance-point kissing his neck had not moved.

Their eyes locked.

'Excuse me, sirs,' List said. 'It appears this is not an instance of desired combat. If you would both observe ...'

Coltaine pulled the weapon away, swung around.

The Khundryl war chiefs waited in a row before them, not thirty paces away. They wore, beneath skins and furs and fetishes, a strange greyish armour that looked almost reptilian. Long moustaches, knotted beards and spiked braids – all black – disguised most of their features, though what remained visible was sun-darkened and angular.

One nudged his pony a step closer and spoke in broken Malazan. 'Blackwing! How think you the odds this day?'

Coltaine twisted in his saddle, studied the dust clouds now both north and south, then settled back. 'I would make no wager.'

'We have long awaited this day,' the war chief said. He stood in his stirrups and gestured to the south hills. 'Tregyn and Bhilard both, this day.' He waved northward. 'And Can'eld, and Semk, aye, even Tithansi – what's left, that is. The great tribes of the south odhans, yet who among them all is the most powerful? The answer is with this day.'

'You'd better hurry,' Duiker said. *We're running out of soldiers for you to show your prowess on, you pompous bastard.*

Coltaine seemed to have similar thoughts, though his temper was cooler. 'The question belongs to you, nor do I care either way its answer.'

'Are such concerns beyond the Wickan clans, then? Are you not yourselves a tribe?'

Coltaine slowly settled the lance's butt in its socket. 'No, we are soldiers of the Malazan Empire.'

Hood's *breath, I got through to him.*

The war chief nodded, unperturbed by that answer. 'Then be watchful, Fist Coltaine, while you attend to this day.'

The riders wheeled about, parting to rejoin their clans.

'I believe,' Coltaine said, looking around, 'you have selected a good vantage, Historian, so here shall I remain.'

'Fist?'

A faint smile touched his lean features. 'For a short time.'

The Crow Clan and the Seventh gave it their all, but the forces holding the mouth of the valley – from their high ground to either side and farther down the valley's throat – did not yield. The Chain of Dogs contracted between the hammer of Korbolo Dom and the anvil of the Tregyn and Bhilard. It was only a matter of time.

The actions of the Khundryl clans changed all that. For they had come, not to join in the slaughter of Malazans, but to give answer to the one question demanded of their pride and honour. The south mass struck the Tregyn position like a vengeful god's scythe. The north was a spear thrusting deep into Korbolo Dom's flank. A third, hitherto unseen force swept up from the valley itself, behind the Bhilard. Within minutes of the perfectly timed contacts, the Malazan forces found themselves unopposed, while the chaos of battle reigned on all sides.

Korbolo Dom's army quickly recovered, reforming with as much precision as they could muster, and drove back the Khundryl after more than four hours of pitched battle. One aim had been achieved, however, and that was the shattering of the Semk, the Can'eld and whatever was left of the Tithansi. *Half an answer,* Coltaine had muttered at that point, in a tone of utter bewilderment.

The southern forces broke the Tregyn and Bhilard an hour later, and set off in pursuit of the fleeing remnants.

With dusk an hour away, a lone Khundryl war chief rode up to them at a slow canter, and as he neared they saw that it was the spokesman. He'd been in a scrap and was smeared in blood, at least half of it his own, yet he rode straight in his saddle.

He reined in ten paces from Coltaine.

The Fist spoke. 'You have your answer, it seems.'

'We have it, Blackwing.'

'The Khundryl.'

Surprise flitted on the warrior's battered face. 'You honour us, but no. We strove to break the one named Korbolo Dom, but failed. The answer is not the Khundryl.'

'Then you do honour to Korbolo Dom?'

The war chief spat at that, growled his disbelief. 'Spirits below! You cannot be such a fool! The answer this day ...' The war chief yanked free his tulwar from its leather sheath, revealing a blade snapped ten inches above the hilt. He raised it over his head and bellowed, *'The Wickans! The Wickans! The Wickans!'*

CHAPTER TWENTY

This path's a dire thing,
the gate it leads to
is like a corpse
over which ten thousand
nightmares bicker
their fruitless claims.

The Path
Trout Sen'al' Bhok'arala

Seagulls wheeled above them, the first they'd seen in a long while. The horizon ahead, on their course bearing of south by southeast, revealed an uneven smudge that grew steadily even as the day prepared for its swift demise.

Not a single cloud marred the sky and the wind was brisk and steady.

Salk Elan joined Kalam on the forecastle. Both of them were wrapped in cloaks against the rhythmic spray kicked up by *Ragstopper's* headlong plunge into the troughs. To the sailors manning stations on the main deck and aft, the sight of them standing there at the bow like a pair of Great Ravens was black-wrought with omens.

Oblivious to all this, Kalam's gaze held on the island that awaited them.

'By midnight,' Salk Elan said with a loud sigh. 'Ancient birthplace of the Malazan Empire—'

The assassin snorted. 'Ancient? How old do you think the Empire is? Hood's breath!'

'All right, too romantic by far. I was but seeking a mood—'

'Why?' Kalam barked.

Elan shrugged. 'No particular reason, except perhaps this brooding atmosphere of anticipation, nay, impatience, even.'

'What's to brood about?'

'You tell me, friend.'

Kalam grimaced, said nothing.

'Malaz City,' Elan resumed. 'What should I expect?'

'Imagine a pigsty by the sea and that'll do. A rotten, festering bug-ridden swamp—'

'All right, all right! Sorry I asked!'

'The captain?'

'No change, alas.'

Why am I not surprised? Sorcery – gods, how I hate sorcery!

Salk Elan rested long-fingered hands on the rail, revealing once again his love of green-hued gems set in gaudy rings. 'A fast ship could take us across to Unta in a day and a half...'

'And how would you know that?'

'I asked a sailor, Kalam, how else? That salt-crusted friend of yours pretending to be in charge, what's his name again?'

'I don't recall asking.'

'It's a true, admirable talent, that.'

'What is?'

'Your ability to crush your own curiosity, Kalam. Highly practical in some ways, dreadfully risky in others. You're a hard man to know, harder even to predict—'

'That's right, Elan.'

'Yet you like me.'

'I do?'

'Aye, you do. And I'm glad, because it's important to me—'

'Go find a sailor if you're that way, Elan.'

The other man smiled. 'That is not what I meant, but of course you're well aware of that, you just can't help flinging darts. What I'm saying is, I enjoy being liked by someone I admire—'

Kalam spun around. *'What* do you find so admirable, Salk Elan? In all your vague suppositions, have you discovered a belief that I'm susceptible to flattery? *Why* are you eager for a partnership?'

'Killing the Empress won't be easy,' the man replied. 'But just imagine succeeding! Achieving what all thought to be impossible! Oh yes, I want to be part of that, Kalam Mekhar! Right there alongside you, driving blades into the heart of the most powerful Empire in the world!'

'You've lost your mind,' Kalam said in a quiet voice, barely audible above the seas. 'Kill the Empress? Am I to join you in this madness? Not a chance, Salk Elan.'

'Spare me the dissembling,' he sneered.

'What sorcery holds this ship?'

Salk Elan's eyes widened involuntarily. Then he shook his head. 'Beyond my abilities, Kalam, and Hood knows I've tried. I've searched every inch of Pormqual's loot, and nothing.'

'The ship herself?'

'Not that I could determine. Look, Kalam, we're being tracked by someone in a warren – that's my guess. Someone who wants to make certain of that cargo. A theory only, but it's all I've got. Thus, friend, all my secrets unveiled.'

Kalam was silent a long moment, then he shook himself. 'I have contacts in Malaz City – an unexpected converging well ahead of schedule, but there it is.'

'Contacts, excellent – we'll need them. Where?'

'There's a black heart in Malaz City, the blackest. The one thing every denizen avoids mention of, wilfully ignores – and there, if all goes well, we will await our allies.'

'Let me guess: the infamous tavern called Smiley's, once owned by the man who would one day become an Emperor – the sailors tell me the food is quite awful.'

Kalam stared at the man in wonder. Hood *alone knows, either breathtakingly sardonic or ... or what, by the Abyss?* 'No, a place called the Deadhouse. And not inside it, but at the gates, though by all means, Salk Elan, feel free to explore its yard.'

The man leaned both arms on the rail, squinting out at the dull lights of Malaz City. 'Assuming a long wait for your friends, perhaps I shall, perhaps I shall at that.'

It was unlikely he noticed Kalam's feral grin.

Iskaral Pust gripped the latch with both hands, his feet planted against the door, and, gibbering his terror, pulled frantically – to no avail. With a growl, Mappo stepped over Icarium where he lay at the foot of Tremorlor's entrance, and prised the High Priest from the unyielding barrier.

Fiddler heard the Trell straining at the latch, but the sapper's attention was fixed on the swarm of bloodflies. Tremorlor was resisting them, but the advance was inexorable. Blind stood at his side, head lifted, hackles raised. The four other Hounds had reappeared on the trail and were charging towards the yard's vine-wreathed gate. The shadow cast down by the D'ivers swept over them like black water.

'It either opens at the touch,' Apsalar said in a startlingly calm voice, 'or it does not open at all. Stand back, Mappo, let us all try.'

'Icarium stirs!' Crokus cried out.

'It's the threat,' the Trell answered. 'Gods below, not here, not now!'

'No better time!' Iskaral Pust shrieked.

Apsalar spoke again. 'Crokus, you're the last to try but Fiddler. Come here, quickly.'

The silence that followed told Fiddler all he needed to know. He risked a glance back to where Mappo crouched over Icarium. 'Awaken him,' he said, 'or all is lost.'

The Trell lifted his face and the sapper saw the anguished indecision writ there. 'This close to Tremorlor – the risk, Fiddler—'

'What—'

But he got no further.

As if speared by lightning, the Jhag's body jolted, a high-pitched keening rising from him. The sound buffeted the others and sent them tumbling. Fresh blood streaming from the wound on his head and his eyes struggling to open, Icarium surged to his feet. The ancient single-edged long sword slipped free, the blade a strange, shivering blur.

The Hounds and the D'ivers swarm reached the yard simultaneously. The grounds and ragged trees erupted, chaotic webs of root and branch twisting skyward like black sails, billowing, spreading wide. Other roots snapped out for the Hounds – the beasts screamed. Blind was gone from Fiddler's side, down among her kin.

At that moment, in the midst of all he saw, Fiddler grinned inwardly. *Not just Shadowthrone for treachery – how could an Azath resist the Hounds of Shadow?*

A hand gripped his shoulder.

'The latch!' Apsalar hissed. 'Try the door, Fid!'

The D'ivers struck Tremorlor's last, desperate defence. Wood exploded.

The sapper was pushed against the door by a pair of hands on his back, catching a momentary glimpse of Mappo, his arms wrapped around a still mostly unaware Icarium, holding the Jhag back even as that keening sound

rose and with it an overwhelming, inexorable power burgeoned. The pressure slapped Fiddler against the door's sweaty, dark wood and held him there in effortless contempt, whispering its promise of annihilation. He struggled to work his arm towards the latch, straining every muscle to that single task.

Hounds howled from the farthest reaches of the yard, a triumphant, outraged sound that rose towards fear as Icarium's own rage swallowed all else. Fiddler felt the wood tremble, felt that tremble spread through the House.

His sweat mingling with Tremorlor's, the sapper gave one last surge of all his strength, willing success, willing the achievement of moving his arm, closing a hand on the latch.

And failed.

Behind him another blood-curdling noise reached through, that of the bloodflies, breaking through the wooden nets, coming ever closer, only moments from clashing with Icarium's deadly anger – *the Jhag will awaken then. No other choice – and our deaths will be the least of it. The Azath, the maze and all its prisoners . . . oh, be very thorough in your rage, Icarium, for the sake of this world and every other—*

Stabbing pain lanced the back of Fiddler's hand – *Bloodflies!* – but there was a weight behind it. Not stings, but the grip of small claws. The sapper cocked his head and found himself staring into Moby's fanged grin.

The familiar made its way down the length of his arm, claws puncturing skin. The creature seemed to be shifting in and out of focus before Fiddler's eyes, and with each blur the weight on his arm was suddenly immense. He realized he was screaming.

Moby clambered beyond the sapper's hand onto the door itself, reached out a tiny, wrinkled hand to the latch, touched it.

Fiddler tumbled onto damp, warm flagstones. He heard shouts behind him, the scrabbling of boots, while the House groaned on all sides. He rolled onto his back, and in the process came down on something that

snapped and crackled beneath his weight, lifting to him a bitter smell of dust.

Then Icarium's deathly keening was among them.

Tremorlor shook.

Fiddler twisted into a sitting position.

They were in a hallway, the limestone walls shedding a dull yellow, throbbing light. Mappo still held Icarium and as the sapper watched, the Trell struggled to retain his embrace. A moment later the Jhag subsided, slumping once again in the Trell's arms. The golden light steadied, the walls themselves stilled. Icarium's rage was gone.

Mappo sagged to the floor, head hanging over the insensate body of his friend.

Fiddler slowly looked around to see if they'd lost anyone. Apsalar crouched beside her father, their backs to the now shut door. Crokus had dragged a cowering Iskaral Pust in with him, and the High Priest looked up, blinking as if in disbelief.

Fiddler's voice was a croak. 'The Hounds, Iskaral Pust?'

'Escaped! And yet, even in the midst of betrayal, they threw their power against the D'ivers!' He paused, sniffed the dank air. 'Can you smell it? Tremorlor's satisfaction – the D'ivers has been taken.'

'That betrayal might have been instinctive, High Priest,' Apsalar said. 'Five Ascendants in the House's yard – the vast risk to Tremorlor itself, given Shadow's own penchant for treachery—'

'Lies! We played true!'

'A first time for everything,' Crokus muttered. He looked across to Fiddler. 'Glad it opened to you, Fid.'

The sapper started, searched the hallway. 'It didn't. Moby opened the door and ripped my arm to shreds in the process – where is that damned runt? It's in here somewhere—'

'You're sitting on a corpse,' Apsalar's father observed.

Fiddler glanced down to find himself on a nest of bones and rotted clothing. He clambered clear, cursing.

'I don't see him,' Crokus said. 'You sure he made it inside, Fid?'

'Aye, I'm sure.'

'He must have gone deeper into the House—'

'He seeks the gate!' Pust squealed. 'The Path of Hands!'

'Moby's a famil—'

'More lies! That disgusting bhok'aral is a Soletaken, you fool!'

'Relax. There is no gate in here that offers a shapeshifter anything,' Apsalar said, slowly rising, her eyes on the withered corpse behind Fiddler. 'That would have been the Keeper – each Azath has a guardian. I'd always assumed they were immortal ...' She stepped forward, kicked at the bones. She grunted. 'Not human – those limbs are too long, and look at the joints – too many of them. This thing could bend every which way.'

Mappo lifted his head. 'Forkrul Assail.'

'The least known of the Elder Races, then. Not even hinted of in any Seven Cities legend I've heard.' She swung her attention to the hallway.

Five paces from the door the passage opened on a T-intersection, with double doors directly opposite the entrance.

'The layout's almost identical,' Apsalar whispered.

'To what?' Crokus asked.

'Deadhouse, Malaz City.'

Pattering feet approached the intersection, and a moment later Moby scampered into view. The creature flapped up and into the Daru's arms.

'He's shaking,' Crokus said, hugging the familiar.

'Oh, great,' Fiddler muttered.

'The Jhag,' Pust hissed from where he knelt a few paces from Mappo and Icarium. 'I saw you crushing him in your arms – is he dead?'

The Trell shook his head. 'Unconscious. I don't think he'll awaken for some time—'

'Then let the Azath take him! Now! We are within Tremorlor. Our need for him has ended!'

'No.'

'Fool!'

A bell clanged somewhere outside. They all looked at each other in disbelief.

'Did we hear that?' Fiddler wondered. 'A *merchant's* bell?'

'Why a merchant?' Pust growled, eyes darting suspiciously.

But Crokus was nodding. 'A merchant's bell. In Darujhistan, that is.'

The sapper went to the door. From within, the latch moved smoothly under his hand, and he swung the door back.

Thin sheets of tangled root now rose from the yard, towering over the House itself in a clash of angles and planes. Humped earth steamed on all sides. Waiting just outside the arched gate were three huge, ornate carriages, each drawn by nine white horses. A roundish figure stood beneath the arch, wearing silks. The figure raised a hand towards Fiddler and called out in Daru, 'Alas, I can go no farther! I assure you, all is calm out here. I seek the one named Fiddler.'

'Why?' the sapper barked.

'I deliver a gift. Gathered in great haste and at vast expense, I might add. I suggest we complete the transaction as quickly as possible, all things considered.'

Crokus now stood beside Fiddler. The Daru was frowning at the carriages. 'I know the maker of those,' he said quietly. 'Bernuk's, just back of

Lakefront. But I've never seen them that big before – gods, I've been away too long.'

Fiddler sighed. 'Darujhistan.'

'I'm certain of it,' Crokus said, shaking his head.

Fiddler stepped outside and studied the surroundings. Things seemed, as the merchant had said, calm. Quiescent. Still uneasy, the sapper made his way down the path. He halted two paces from the archway and eyed the merchant warily.

'Karpolan Demesand, sir, of the Trygalle Trade Guild, and this is a run that I and my shareholders shall never regret, yet hope never to repeat.' The man's exhaustion was very evident, and his silks hung soaked in sweat. He gestured and an armoured woman with a deathly pale face stepped past him, carrying a small crate. Karpolan continued, 'Compliments of a certain mage of the Bridgeburners, who was advised – in timely fashion – of your situation in a general way, by the corporal you share.'

Fiddler accepted the box, now grinning. 'The efforts of this delivery surpass me, sir,' he said.

'Me as well, I assure you. Now we must flee – ah, a rude bluntness – I meant "depart", of course. We must depart.' He sighed, looking around. 'Forgive me, I am weary, beyond even achieving the expected courtesies of civil discourse.'

'No need for apologies,' Fiddler said. 'While I have no idea how you got here and no idea how you'll get back to Darujhistan, I wish you a safe and swift journey. One last question, however: did the mage say anything about where the contents of this crate came from?'

'Oh, indeed he did, sir. From the Blue City's streets. An obscure reference you are clearly fortunate to understand in an instant, I see.'

'Did the mage give you any warning as to the handling of this package, Karpolan?'

The merchant grimaced. 'He said we were not to jostle too much. However, this last stretch of our journey was somewhat ... rough. I regret to say that some of the crate's contents may well be broken.'

Fiddler smiled. 'I am pleased to inform you that they have survived.'

Karpolan Demesand frowned. 'You have not yet examined the contents – how can you tell?'

'You'll just have to trust me on that one, sir.'

Crokus closed the door once Fiddler had carried the crate inside. The sapper gingerly set the container down and prised open the lid. 'Ah, Quick Ben,' he whispered, eyes scanning the objects nestled within, 'one day I shall raise a temple in your name.' He counted seven cussers, thirteen masonry crackers and four flamers.

'But how did that merchant get here?' Crokus asked. 'From Darujhistan! Hood's breath, Fid!'

'Don't I know it.' He straightened, glanced at the others. 'I'm feeling good, comrades. Very good indeed.'

'Optimism!' Pust snarled in a tone close to bursting with disgust. The High Priest yanked at the wispy remnants of his hair. 'While that foul monkey pisses terror into the lad's lap! *Optimism!'*

Crokus now held the familiar out from him and stared disbelieving at the stream pouring down to splash the flagstones. 'Moby?' The creature was grinning sheepishly.

'Soletaken, you mean!'

'A momentary lapse,' Apsalar said, eyeing the squirming creature. 'The realization of what has come about. That, or an odd sense of humour.'

'What are you babbling about?' Pust demanded, eyes narrowing.

'He thought he'd found the Path, thought that what called him here was the ancient promise of Ascendancy – and in a way, Moby was right in

thinking that. The bhok'aral there in your hands, Crokus, is demonic. In true form, it could hold you as you now hold it.'

Mappo grunted. 'Ah, I see now.'

'Then why not enlighten us?' Crokus snapped.

Apsalar nudged the corpse at her feet. 'Tremorlor needed a new guardian. Need I be any clearer?'

Crokus blinked, looking again at Moby, the trembling creature in his hands. 'My uncle's familiar?'

'A demon, at the moment somewhat intimidated by expectation, we might assume. But I'm sure the creature will grow into the role.'

Fiddler had been packing the Moranth munitions into his leather sack while this had been going on. Now he rose and gingerly swung the bag over a shoulder. 'Quick Ben believed we'd find a portal somewhere in here, a warren's gate—'

'Linking the Houses!' Pust crowed. 'Outrageous audacity – this cunning mage of yours has charmed me, soldier. He should have been a servant of Shadow!'

He *was, but never mind that. If your god's of a mind to, he'll tell you – though I wouldn't hold my breath* . . . 'It's time to find that portal—'

'To the T-intersection, down the left passage to the two doors. The one to the left takes us into the tower. Top floor.' Apsalar smiled.

Fiddler stared at her a moment, then nodded. *Your borrowed memories* . . .

Moby led the way, revealing a return of nerve, and something like possessive pride. Just beyond the intersection, in the left-hand passage, there was an alcove set in the wall, on which hung resplendent scale armour suited to a wearer over ten foot tall and of massive girth. Two double-bladed axes leaned against the niche walls, one to either side. Moby paused there to play a tiny, loving hand over one iron-sheathed boot, before wistfully moving on. Crokus stumbled in passing as it momentarily gripped his full attention.

Upon opening the door, they entered the tower's ground floor. A stone staircase spiralled up from its centre. At the foot of the saddlebacked steps lay another body, a young, dark-skinned woman who looked as if she had been placed there but an hour before. She was dressed in what were clearly underclothes, though the armour that had once covered them was nowhere to be seen. Vicious wounds crisscrossed her slight form.

Apsalar approached, crouched down and rested a hand on the girl's shoulder. 'I know her,' she whispered.

'Eh?' Rellock growled.

'The memory of the one who possessed me, Father,' she said. 'His mortal memory—'

'Dancer,' Fiddler said.

She nodded. 'This is Dassem Ultor's daughter. The First Sword recovered her after Hood was done using her, and brought her here, it seems.'

'Before breaking his vow to Hood—'

'Aye, before Dassem cursed the god he once served.'

'That was years ago, Apsalar,' Fiddler said.

'I know.'

They were silent, all studying the frail young woman lying at the foot of the stairs. Mappo shifted Icarium's weight in his arms, as if uneasy with the echo he knew he had become, even though it was understood that he would not do with his burden what Dassem Ultor had done.

Apsalar straightened and cast her eyes up the staircase. 'If Dancer's memory serves, the portal awaits.'

Fiddler swung to the others. 'Mappo? You will join us?'

'Aye, though perhaps not all the way – assuming there's a means to leave that warren when one so chooses—'

'Quite an assumption,' the sapper said.

The Trell simply shrugged.

'Iskaral Pust?'

'Oh, aye. Of course, of course! Why not, why ever not? To walk the maze back out? Insanity! Iskaral Pust is anything but insane, as you all well know. Aye, I shall accompany you . .. and silently add to naught but myself: perhaps an opportunity for betrayal will yet arise! Betray what? Betray whom? Does it matter? It is not the goal that brings pleasure, but the journey taken to achieve it!'

Fiddler met Crokus's sharp gaze. 'Watch him,' he said.

'I shall.'

The sapper then glanced down to Moby. The familiar squatted by the doorway, quietly playing with its own tail. 'How does one say goodbye to a bhok'aral?'

'With a boot in the backside, how else?' Pust offered.

'Care to try that with this one?' Fiddler asked.

The High Priest scowled, made no move.

'He was out there when we travelled the storms, wasn't he?' Crokus said, approaching the tiny wizened creature. 'Recall those battles we could not see? He was protecting us ... all along.'

'Aye,' the sapper said.

'Ulterior motives!' Pust hissed.

'Nonetheless.'

'Gods, he'll be lonely!' Crokus gathered the bhok'aral into his arms. There was no shame to the tears in the lad's eyes.

Blinking, Fiddler turned away, grimacing as he studied the staircase. 'It'll do you no good to draw it out, Crokus,' he said.

'I'll find a way to visit,' the Daru whispered.

'Think on what you see, Crokus,' Apsalar said. 'He looks content enough. As for being alone, how do you know that will be the case? There are other Houses, other guardians ...'

The lad nodded. Slowly he released his grip on the familiar and set it down. 'With luck, there won't be any crockery lying around.'

'What?'

Crokus smiled. 'Moby always had bad luck around crockery, or should I say it the other way around?' He rested a hand on the creature's blunt, hairless head, then rose. 'Let's go.'

The bhok'aral watched the group ascend the stairs. A moment later there was a midnight flash from above, and they were gone. The creature listened carefully, cocking its tiny head, but there was no more sound from the chamber above.

It sat unmoving for a few more minutes, idly plucking at its own tail, then swung about and scampered into the hallway, coming to a stop before the suit of armour.

The massive, closed great helm tilted with a soft creak, and a ragged voice came from it. 'I am pleased my solitude is at an end, little one. Tremorlor welcomes you with all its heart ... even if you have made a mess on the hallway floor.'

Dust and gravel sprayed, rapping against Duiker's shield, as the Wickan horsewarrior struck the ground and rolled, coming to a stop at the historian's feet. No more than a lad, the Crow looked almost peaceful, eyes closed as if in gentle sleep. But for him, all dreams had ended.

Duiker stepped over the body and stood for a moment in the dust it had raised. The short sword in his right hand was glued there by blood, announcing every shift of his grip with a thick, sobbing sound.

Riders wheeled across the hoof-churned space before the historian. Arrows sped out from the gaps between them, hummed like tigerflies through the air. He jerked his shield around to catch one darting for his face, and grunted at the solid whack that drove the hide-covered rim against mouth and chin, splitting both.

Tarxian cavalry had broken through and was only moments away from severing the dozen remaining squads from the rest of the company. The Crow counterattack had been savage and furious, but costly. Worst of all, Duiker saw as he moved warily forward, it might well have failed.

The infantry squads had been broken apart and had reformed into four groups – only one of them substantial – which now struggled to re-knit. Less than a score of Crow horsewarriors remained upright, each one surrounded by Tarxians hacking at them with their broad-bladed tulwars. Everywhere horses writhed and screamed on the ground, kicking out in their pain.

The back end of a cavalry horse nearly knocked him over. Stepping around, Duiker closed in and thrust the point of his sword into a Tarxian's leather-clad thigh. The light armour resisted a moment, until the historian threw all his weight behind the stab, feeling the point pierce flesh, sink deep and grate against bone. He twisted the blade.

A tulwar slashed down, biting solidly into Duiker's shield. He bent low, pulling the snagged weapon with him. Fresh blood drenched his sword hand as he yanked his blade free. The historian hacked and chopped at the man's hip until the horse sidestepped, carrying the rider beyond his reach.

He pushed his helm rim clear of his eyes, blinked away grit and sweat, then moved forward again, towards the largest knot of infantry.

Three days since Sanimon Valley and the bloody reprieve granted them by the Khundryl tribe. Their unexpected allies had closed that battle pursuing the remnants of their rival tribes into the hours of dusk, before slipping off to return, presumably, to their own lands. They had not been seen since.

The mauling had driven Korbolo Dom into a rage – that much was patently clear – for the attacks were now incessant, a running battle over forty hours long and with no sign that it would relent any time soon.

The beleaguered Chain of Dogs was struck again and again, from the flanks, from behind, at times from two or three directions at once. What vengeful blades, lances and arrows did not achieve, exhaustion was completing. Soldiers were simply falling to the ground, their armour in tatters, countless minor wounds slowly draining the last of their reserves. Hearts failed, major blood vessels burst beneath skin to blossom into bruises that were deep black, as if some dreadful plague now ran amok through the troops.

The scenes Duiker had witnessed were beyond horror, beyond his ability to comprehend.

He reached the infantry even as the other groups managed to close and link up, wheeling into a bladed wheel formation that no horse – no matter how well trained – would challenge.

Within the ring, a swordsman began beating sword on shield, bellowing to add his voice to the rhythm of blows. The wheel spun, each soldier stepping in time, spun, crossing the ground, spun, slowly returning to where the remaining company still held the line on this, the west flank of the Chain.

Duiker moved with them, part of the outer ring, delivering killing blows to whatever wounded enemy soldier the wheel trampled. Five Crow riders kept pace. They were the last survivors of the counterattack and, of those, two would not fight again.

A few moments later the wheel reached the line, broke apart and melted into it. The Wickans dug spurs into their lathered horses to race southward. Duiker pushed his way through the ranks until he stumbled into the clear. He lowered his quivering arms, spat blood onto the ground, then slowly raised his head.

The mass of refugees marched before him, a procession grinding past the spot where he stood. Wreathed in dust, hundreds of faces were turned in his direction, watching that thin cordon of infantry behind him – all that lay

between them and slaughter – as it surged, buckled and grew ever thinner with each minute that passed. The faces were expressionless, driven to a place beyond thought and beyond emotion. They were part of a tidal flow where no ebb was possible, where to drop back too far was fatal, and so they stumbled on, clutching the last and most precious of their possessions: their children.

Two figures approached Duiker, coming down alongside the stream of refugees from the vanguard position. The historian stared at them blankly, sensing that he should recognize the two – but every face had become a stranger's face.

'Historian!'

The voice jarred him out of his fugue. His split lip stung as he said, 'Captain Lull.'

A webbed jug was thrust at him. Duiker forced his short sword back into its scabbard and accepted the jug. The cool water filled his mouth with pain but he ignored it, drinking deep.

'We've reached Geleen Plain,' Lull said.

The other person was Duiker's nameless marine. She wavered where she stood, and the historian saw a vicious puncture wound in her left shoulder, where a lance-point had slipped over her shield. Broken rings from her armour glittered in the gaping hole.

Their eyes met. Duiker saw nothing still alive in those once beautiful light-grey eyes, yet the alarm he felt within him came not from what he saw, but from his own lack of shock, the frightening absence of all feeling – even dismay.

'Coltaine wants you,' Lull said.

'He's still breathing, is he?'

'Aye.'

'I imagine he wants this.' Duiker pulled free the small glass bottle on its silver chain. 'Here—'

'No,' Lull said, frowning. 'Wants you, Historian. We've run into a tribe of the Sanith Odhan – so far they're just watching.'

'Seems the rebellion's a less certain thing down here,' Duiker muttered.

Sounds of battle along the flanking line diminished. Another pause, a few heartbeats in which to recover, to repair armour, quench bleeding.

The captain gestured and they began walking alongside the refugees.

'What tribe, then?' the historian asked after a moment. 'And, more importantly, what's it got to do with me?'

'The Fist has reached a decision,' Lull said.

Something in those words chilled Duiker. He thought to probe for more, yet dismissed the notion. The details of that decision belonged to Coltaine. *The man leads an army that refuses to die. We've not lost a refugee to enemy action in thirty hours. Five thousand soldiers . . . spitting in the face of every god. . .*

'What do you know of the tribes this close to the city?' Lull asked as they continued on.

'They've no love of Aren,' Duiker said.

'Worse for them under the Empire?'

The historian grunted, seeing the direction the captain pursued in his questions. 'No, better. The Malazan Empire understands borderlands, the different needs of those living in the countryside – vast territories in the Empire, after all, remain nomadic, and the tribute demanded is never exorbitant. More, payment for passage across tribal lands is always generous and prompt. Coltaine should know this well enough, Captain.'

'I imagine he does – I'm the one that needs convincing.'

Duiker glanced at the refugees on their left, scanning the row upon row of faces, young and old, within the ever-present shroud of dust. Thoughts pushed past weariness, and Duiker felt himself tottering on an edge, beyond which – he could now clearly see – waited Coltaine's desperate gamble.

The Fist has reached a decision.

And his officers balk, flinch back overwhelmed with uncertainty. Has Coltaine succumbed to despair? Or does he see all too well?

Five thousand soldiers . . .

'What can I say to you, Lull?' Duiker asked.

'That there's no choice left.'

'You can answer that yourself.'

'I dare not.' The man grimaced, his scarred face twisting, his lone eye narrowing amidst a nest of wrinkles. 'It's the children, you see. It's what they have left – the last thing they have left. Duiker—'

The historian's abrupt nod cut out the need to say anything more – a swiftly granted mercy. He'd seen those faces, had come close to studying them – as if, he'd thought at the time, seeking to find the youth that belonged there, the freedom and innocence – but that was not what he sought, nor what he found. Lull had led him to the word itself. Simple, immutable, thus far still sacrosanct.

Five thousand soldiers will give their lives for it. But is this some kind of romantic foolishness – do I yearn for recognition among these simple soldiers? Is any soldier truly simple – simple in the sense of having a spare, pragmatic way of seeing the world and his place in it? And does such a view preclude the profound awareness I *now believe exists in these battered, footsore men and women?*

Duiker swung his gaze to his nameless marine, and found himself meeting those remarkable eyes, as if she had but waited for him – his thoughts, doubts and fears – to come around, to seek her.

She shrugged. 'Are we so blind that we cannot see it, Duiker? We defend their *dignity.* There, simple as that. More, it is our strength. Is this what you wished to hear?'

I'll accept that minor castigation. Never underestimate a soldier.

Sanimon itself was a massive tel, a flat-topped hill half a mile across and over thirty arm-spans high, its jumbled plateau barren and windswept. In the Sanith Odhan immediately south of it, where the Chain now struggled, two ancient raised roads remained from the time when the tel had been a thriving city. Both roads ran straight as spears on solid cut-stone foundations; the one to the west – now unused as it led to another tel in hills bone dry and nowhere else – was called Painesan'm. The other, Sanijhe'm, stretched southwest and still provided an overland route to the inland sea called Clatar. At a height of fifteen arm-spans, the roads had become causeways.

Coltaine's Crow Clan commanded Sanijhe'm near the tel, manning it as if it was a wall. The southern third of Sanimon itself was now a Wickan strongpoint, with warriors and archers of the Foolish Dog and Weasel clans. As the refugees were led along the east edge of Sanimon, the tel's high cliff wall obviated the need for a flanking guard on that side. Troops moved to support the rearguard and the eastern flank. Korbolo Dom's forces, which had been engaged in a running battle with both elements, had their noses bloodied once again. The Seventh was still something to behold, despite its diminished numbers, soldiers among it pitching dead to the ground without a visible wound on them, others wailing and weeping even as they slayed their foes. The arrival of mounted Wickan archers completed the rout, and the time had come once more for rest.

Fist Coltaine stood waiting, alone, facing the odhan to the south. His feather cloak fluttered in the wind, its ragged edges shivering in the air's breath. Lining a ridge of hills in that direction, two thousand paces distant, another tribe sat their horses, barbaric war standards motionless against the pale-blue sky.

Duiker's gaze held on the man as they approached. He tried to put himself inside Coltaine's skin, to find the place where the Fist now lived – and flinched back in his mind. *No, not a failure of imagination on my part. An unwillingness. I can carry* no-one *else's burden – not even for a moment. We are all pulled inside ourselves now, each alone . . .*

Coltaine spoke without turning. 'The Kherahn Dhobri – or so they are named on the map.'

'Aren's reluctant neighbours,' Duiker said.

The Fist turned at that, his eyes sharp. 'We have ever held to our treaties,' he said.

'Aye, Fist, we have – to the outrage of many Aren natives.'

Coltaine faced the distant tribe again, silent for a long minute.

The historian glanced at his nameless marine. 'You should seek out a cutter,' he said.

'I can still hold a shield—'

'No doubt, but it's the risk of infection ...'

Her eyes widened and Duiker was felled mute, a rush of sorrow flooding him. He broke the gaze. *You're a fool, old man.*

Coltaine spoke. 'Captain Lull.'

'Fist.'

'Are the wagons ready?'

'Aye, sir. Coming up now.'

Coltaine nodded. 'Historian.'

'Fist?'

The Wickan slowly turned round to face Duiker. 'I give you Nil and Nether, a troop from the three clans. Captain, has Commander Bult informed the wounded?'

'Aye, sir, and they have refused you.'

The skin tightened around Coltaine's eyes, but then he slowly nodded.

'As has,' Lull continued, looking at Duiker, 'Corporal List.'

'I admit,' the Fist sighed, 'those I selected from my own people are none too pleased – yet they will not disobey their warleader. Historian, you shall command as you see fit. Your responsibility, however, is singular. Deliver the refugees to Aren.'

And so we come to this. 'Fist—'

'You are Malazan,' Coltaine cut in. 'Follow the prescribed procedures—'

'And if we are betrayed?'

The Wickan smiled. 'Then we all join Hood, here in one place. If there must be an end to this, let it be fitting.'

'Hold on as long as you can,' Duiker whispered. 'I'll skin Pormqual's face and give the order through his lips if I have to—'

'Leave the High Fist to the Empress – and her Adjunct.'

The historian reached for the glass bottle around his neck.

Coltaine shook his head. 'This tale is yours, Historian, and right now, no-one is more important than you. And if you one day see Dujek, tell him this: it is not the Empire's soldiers the Empress cannot afford to lose, it is its memory.'

A troop of Wickans rode towards them, leading spare mounts – including Duiker's faithful mare. Beyond them, the lead wagons of the refugees emerged from the dust, and off to one side waited three additional wagons, guarded – Duiker could see – by Nil and Nether.

The historian drew a deep breath. 'About Corporal List—'

'He will not be swayed,' Captain Lull cut in. 'He asked that I pass on his words of farewell, Duiker. I believe he muttered something about a ghost at his shoulder, whatever that means, then he said: "Tell the historian that I have found my war."'

Coltaine looked away as if those words had struck through to him where all other words could not. 'Captain, inform the companies: we attack within the hour.'

Attack. Hood's breath! Duiker felt awkward in his own body, his hands like leaden lumps at his sides, as if the question of what to do with his own flesh and bone – what to do in the next moment – had driven him to a crisis.

Lull's voice broke through. 'Your horse has arrived, Historian.'

Duiker released a shaky breath. Facing the captain, he slowly shook his head. 'Historian? No, perhaps I shall return to being a historian a week from now. But at this moment, and for what's to come ...' He shook his head a second time. 'I have no word for what I should be called right now.' He smiled. 'I think "old man" suffices—'

Lull seemed rattled by Duiker's smile. The captain faced Coltaine. 'Fist, this man feels he has no title. He's chosen "old man .

'A poor choice,' the Wickan growled. 'Old men are wise – not fools.' He scowled at Duiker. 'There is not one among your acquaintances who struggles with who and what you are. We know you as a soldier. Does that title insult you, sir?'

Duiker's eyes narrowed. 'No. At least, I don't think so.'

'Lead the refugees to safety, soldier.'

'Yes, Fist.'

The nameless marine spoke. 'I have something for you, Duiker.'

Lull grunted. 'What, here?'

She handed him a tatter of cloth. 'Wait a while before you read what's on it. Please.'

He could only nod as he tucked the scrap in his belt. He looked at the three figures before him, wishing Bult and List had been present for this, but there would be no staged goodbyes, no comfort of roles to step into. Like everything else, the moment was messy, awkward and incomplete.

'Get on that scrawny beast of yours,' Lull said. 'And stay in Hood's blindside, friend.'

'I wish the same for you, all of you.'

Coltaine hissed, wheeling to face north. He bared his teeth. 'Not a chance of that, Duiker. We intend to carve a bloody path ... right down the bastard's throat.'

Flanked by Nil and Nether, Duiker rode at the head of the refugee train, heading towards the tribe on the ridge. The Wickan outriders and those guarding the selected wagons that trundled directly ahead were all very young – boys and girls still with their first weapons. Their collective outrage at having been sent from their clans was a silent storm.

Yet, if Coltaine has erred in this gamble, they will wield those weapons one more time . . . one last time.

'Two riders,' Nil said.

'Good sign,' Duiker grunted, eyes focusing on the Kherahn pair that now approached at a canter. Both were elders, a man and a woman, lean and weathered, their skin the same hue as the buckskins that clothed them. Hook-bladed swords were slung under their left arms and ornate iron helmets covered their heads; their eyes were framed in robust cheek-plates.

'Stay here, Nil,' Duiker said. 'Nether, with me, please.' He nudged his mare forward.

They met just beyond the lead wagons, reining in to face each other with a few paces between them.

Duiker was the first to speak. 'These are Kherahn Dhobri lands, recognized by treaty. The Malazan Empire honours all such treaties. We seek passage—'

The woman, her eyes on the wagons, snapped in unaccented Malazan, 'How much?'

'A collection from all the soldiers of the Seventh,' Duiker said. 'In Imperial coin, a worth totalling forty-one thousand silver jakatas—'

'A full-strength Malazan army's annual wages,' the woman said, scowling. 'This was no "collection". Do your soldiers know you have stolen their

wages to buy passage?'

Duiker blinked, then said softly, 'The soldiers insisted, Elder. This was in truth a collection.'

Nether then spoke. 'From the three Wickan clans, an additional payment: jewellery, cookware, skins, bolts of felt, horseshoes, tack and leather, and an assortment of coins looted in the course of our long journey from Hissar, in an amount approaching seventy-three thousand silver jakatas. All given freely.'

The woman was silent for a long moment, then her companion said something to her in their own tongue. She shook her head in reply, her flat, dun eyes finding the historian again. 'And with this offer, you seek passage for these refugees, and for the Wickan clans, and for the Seventh.'

'No, Elder. For the refugees alone – and this small guard you see here.'

'We reject your offer.'

Lull was right to dread this moment. Dammit—

'It is too much,' the woman said. 'The treaty with the Empress is specific'

At a loss, Duiker could only shrug. 'Then a portion thereof—'

'With the remainder entering Aren, where it shall be hoarded uselessly until such time as Korbolo Dom breaches the gates, and so you end up paying him for the privilege of slaughtering you.'

'Then,' Nether said, 'with that remainder, we would hire you as escort.'

Duiker's heart stuttered.

'To the city's gates? Too far. We shall escort you to Balahn village, and the beginning of the road known as Aren Way. This, however, leaves a portion remaining. We shall sell you food, and what healing may prove necessary and within the abilities of our horsewives.'

'Horsewives?' Nether asked, her brows rising.

The elder nodded.

Nether smiled. 'The Wickans are pleased to know the Kherahn Dhobri.'

'Come forward, then, with your people.'

The two rode back to their kin. Duiker watched them for a moment, then he wheeled his horse and stood in his stirrups. Far to the north, over Sanimon, hung a dust cloud. 'Nether, can you send Coltaine a message?'

'I can offer him a knowing, yes.'

'Do so. Tell him: he was right.'

The sense rose slowly, as if from a body all had believed cold, a corpse in truth, the realization rising, filling the air, the spaces in between. Faces took on a cast of disbelief, a numbness that was reluctant to yield its protective barriers. Dusk arrived, clothing an encampment of thirty thousand refugees in the joining of two silences – one from the land and the night sky with its crushed-glass stars, the other from the people themselves. Dour-faced Kherahnal moved among them, their gifts and gestures belying their expressions and reserve. And to each place they went, it was as if they brought, in their touch, a release.

Sitting beneath that glittering night sky, surrounded by thick grasses, Duiker listened to the cries that cut through the darkness, wrenching at his heart. Joy wrought with dark, blistering anguish, wordless screams, uncontrolled wailing. A stranger would have believed that some horror stalked the camp, a stranger would not have understood the release that the historian heard, the sounds that his own soul answered with burning pain, making him blink at the stars that blurred and swam overhead.

The release born of salvation was nevertheless tortured, and Duiker well knew why, well knew what was reaching down from the north – a host of inescapable truths. Somewhere out there in the darkness stood a wall of human flesh, clothed in shattered armour, which still defied Korbolo Dom, which had purchased and was still purchasing this dread salvation. There was no escape from that knowledge.

Grasses whispered near him and he sensed a familiar presence crouch down beside him.

'How fares Coltaine?' Duiker asked.

Nether sighed. 'The linkage is broken,' she said.

The historian stiffened. After a long moment he released a shaky breath. 'Gone, then?'

'We do not know. Nil continues with the effort, but I fear in our weariness our blood ties are insufficient. We sensed no death cry, and we most surely would, Duiker.'

'Perhaps he's been captured.'

'Perhaps. Historian, if Korbolo Dom arrives on the morrow, these Kherahn will pay dearly for this contract. Nor may they prove sufficient in ... in—'

'Nether?'

She hung her head. 'I am sorry, I cannot stop my ears – they may be deluding themselves. Even if we make it to Balahn, to Aren Way, it is still three leagues to the city itself.'

'I share your misgivings. But out there, well, it's the gestures of kindness, don't you see? We none of us have any defence against them.'

'The release is too soon, Duiker!'

'Possibly, but there's not a damned thing we can do about it.'

They turned at the sound of voices. A group of figures approached from the encampment. A hissing argument was under way, quickly quelled as the group neared.

Duiker slowly rose, Nether doing the same beside him.

'I trust we are not interrupting anything untoward,' Nethpara called out, the words dripping.

'I would suggest,' the historian said, 'that the Council retire for the night. A long day of marching awaits us all tomorrow—'

'And that,' Pullyk Alar said hastily, 'is precisely why we are here.'

'Those of us retaining a measure of wealth,' Nethpara explained, 'have succeeded in purchasing from the Kherahn fresh horses for our carriages.'

'We wish to leave now,' Pullyk added. 'Our small group, that is, and make with all haste for Aren—'

'Where we shall insist the High Fist despatch a force to provide guard for the rest of you,' Nethpara said.

Duiker stared at the two men, then at the dozen figures behind them. 'Where is Tumlit?' he asked.

'Alas, he fell ill three days ago and is no longer among the living. We all deeply mourn his passing.'

No doubt. 'Your suggestion has merit, but is rejected.'

'But—'

'Nethpara, if you start moving now, you'll incite panic, and that is something none of us can afford. No, you travel with the rest of us, and must be content with being the first of the refugees to pass beneath the city gates at the head of the train.'

'This is an outrage!'

'Get out of my sight, Nethpara, before I finish what I began at Vathar Crossing.'

'Oh, do not for a moment believe I have forgotten, Historian!'

'An additional reason for rejecting your request. Return to your carriages, get some sleep – we'll be pushing hard tomorrow.'

'A certainty!' Pullyk hissed. 'Korbolo Dom is hardly finished with us! Now that Coltaine's dead and his army with him, we are to trust our lives to

these stinking nomads? And when the escort ends? Three leagues from Aren! You send us all to our deaths!'

'Aye,' Duiker growled. 'All, or none. Now I'm done speaking. Leave.'

'Oh, are you now that Wickan dog reborn?' He reached for the rapier at his belt. 'I hereby challenge you to a duel—'

The historian's sword was a blur, the flat of the blade cracking Pullyk Alar's temple. The noble-born dropped to the ground unconscious.

'Coltaine reborn?' Duiker whispered. 'No, just a soldier.'

Nether spoke, her eyes on the prone body. 'Your Council will have to pay dearly to have that healed, Nethpara.'

'I suppose I could have swung harder and saved you the coin,' Duiker muttered. 'Get out of my sight, all of you.'

The Council retreated, carrying their fallen spokesman with them.

'Nether, have the Wickans watch them.'

'Aye, sir.'

Balahn village was a squalid collection of low mudbrick houses, home to perhaps forty residents, all of whom had fled days earlier. The only structure less than a century old was the Malazan arched gate that marked the beginning of the Aren Way, a broad, raised military road that had been constructed at Dassem Ultor's command early in the conquest.

Deep ditches flanked the Aren Way, and beyond them were high, flat-topped earthen banks on which grew for the entire ten-mile stretch and in two precise rows, tall cedars that had been transplanted from Geleen on the Clatar Sea.

The Kherahn spokeswoman joined Duiker and the two warlocks in the wide concourse before the Way's gate. 'Payment has been received and all agreements between us honoured.'

'We thank you, Elder,' the historian said.

She shrugged. 'A simple transaction, soldier. No words of thanks are necessary.'

'True. Not necessary, but given in any case.'

'Then you are welcome.'

'The Empress will hear of this, Elder, in the most respectful of terms.'

Her steady eyes darted away at this. She hesitated, then said, 'Soldier, a large force approaches from the north – our rearguard has seen the dust. They come swiftly.'

'Ah, I see.'

'Perhaps some of you will make it.'

'We'll better that if we can.'

'Soldier?'

'Aye, Elder?'

'Are you certain Aren's gates will open to you?'

Duiker's laugh was harsh. 'I'll worry about that when we get there, I think.'

'There's wisdom in that.' She nodded, then gathered her reins. 'Goodbye, soldier.'

'Farewell.'

The Kherahn Dhobri departed, a task that took no more than five minutes, the wagons under heavy escort. Duiker eyed what he could see of the refugee train, their presence overwhelming the small village's ragged boundaries.

He'd set a difficult, gruelling pace, a day and a night with but the briefest pauses for rest, and the message had clearly reached them, one and all, that safety would be assured only once they were within Aren's massively fortified walls.

Three leagues left – it'll take us until dawn to achieve that. Each league I push them hard slows those that follow. Yet what choice do I have? 'Nil, inform your Wickans – I want the entire train through this gate before the sun's set. Your warriors are to use every means possible to achieve that, short of killing or maiming. The refugees may have forgotten their terror of you – remind them.'

'There are but thirty in the troop,' Nether reminded him. 'And all youths at that—'

'Angry youths, you mean. Well, let's offer them an outlet.'

Aren Way accommodated them in their efforts, for the first third, locally known as Ramp, was a gentle downward slope towards the plain on which the city sat. Cone-shaped hills kept pace with them to the east, and would do so to within a thousand paces of Aren's north wall. The hills were not natural: they were mass graves, scores of them, from the misguided slaughter of the city's residents by the T'lan Imass in Kellanved's time. The hill nearest Aren was among the largest, and was home to the city's ruling families and the Holy Protector and Falah'dan.

Duiker left Nil to lead the vanguard and rode at the very rear of the train, where he, Nether and three Wickans shouted themselves hoarse in an effort to hasten the weakest and slowest among the refugees. It was a heartbreaking task, and they passed more than one body that had given out at the pace. There was no time for burial, nor the strength to carry them.

To the north and slightly east, the clouds of dust grew steadily closer.

'They're not taking the road,' Nether gasped, wheeling her mount around to glare at the dust. 'They come overland – slower, much slower—'

'But a shorter route on the map,' Duiker said.

'The hills aren't marked, are they?'

'No, non-Imperial maps show it as a plain – the barrows are too recent an addition, I'd guess.'

'You'd think Korbolo would have a Malazan version—'

'It appears not – and that alone may save us, lass ...'

Yet he could hear the false ring in his own words. The enemy was too close – less than a third of a league away, he judged. Even with the burial mounds, mounted troops could cover that distance in a few-score minutes.

Faint Wickan warcries from the vanguard reached them.

'They've sighted Aren,' Nether said. 'Nil shows me through his eyes—'

'The gates?'

She frowned. 'Closed.'

Duiker cursed. He rode his mare among the stragglers. 'The city's been sighted!' he shouted. 'Not much more! *Move!'*

From some hidden, unexpected place, reserves of energy rose in answer to the historian's words. He sensed, then saw, a ripple run through the masses, a faint quickening of pace, of anticipation – and of fear. The historian twisted in his saddle.

The cloud loomed above the cone-shaped mounds. Closer, yet not as close as it should have been.

'Nether! Are there soldiers on Aren's walls?'

'Aye, not an inch to spare—'

'The gates?'

'No.'

'How close are we up there?'

'A thousand paces – people are running now—'

'What in Hood's name is wrong with them?'

He stared again at the dust cloud. 'Fener's hoof! Nether, take your Wickans – ride for Aren!'

'What about you?'

'To Hood with me, damn you! Go! Save your children!'

She hesitated, then spun her horse around. 'You three!' she barked at the Wickan youths. 'With me!'

He watched them drive their weary horses forward along one edge of the Way, sweeping past the stumbling, pitching refugees.

The train had stretched out, those fleeter of foot slipping ever farther ahead. The elderly surrounded the historian, each step a tortured struggle. Many simply stopped and sat down on the road to await the inevitable. Duiker screamed at them, threatened them, but it was no use. He saw a child, no more than eighteen months old, wandering lost, arms outstretched, dry-eyed and appallingly silent.

Duiker rode close, leaned over in his saddle and swept the child into one arm. Tiny hands gripped the torn fragments of his shirt.

A last row of mounds now separated him and the tail end of the train from the pursuing army.

The flight had not slowed and that was the only evidence the historian had that the gates had, at last, opened to receive the refugees. *Either that or they're spreading out in frantic, hopeless waves along the wall – but no, that would be a betrayal beyond sanity—*

And now he could see, a thousand paces away: Aren. The north gates, flanked by solid towers, yawned for three-quarters of their height – the last, lowest quarter was a seething mass of figures, pushing, crowding, clambering over each other in their panic. But the tide's strength was too great, too inexorable to stopper that passageway. Like a giant maw, Aren was swallowing the refugees. The Wickans rode at either side, desperately trying to contain the human river, and Duiker could now see among them soldiers in the uniform of the Aren City Garrison joining in the effort.

And the army itself? The High *Fist's army?*

They stood on the walls. They watched. Row upon row of faces, figures jostling for a vantage point along the north wall's entire length. Resplendently dressed individuals occupied the platforms atop the towers flanking the gates, looking down at the starved, bedraggled, screaming mob that thronged the city entrance.

City Garrison Guards were suddenly among the last of those refugees still moving. On all sides around Duiker, he saw grim-faced soldiers pick people up and carry them at a half-jog towards the gates. Spotting one guardsman bearing the insignia of a captain, the historian rode up to him. 'You! Take this child!'

The man reached up to close his hands around the silent, wide-eyed toddler. 'Are you Duiker?' the captain asked.

'Aye.'

'You're to report to the High Fist immediately, sir – there, on the left-hand tower—'

'That bastard will have to wait,' Duiker growled. 'I will see every damned refugee through first! Now run, Captain, but tell me your name, for there may well be a mother or father still alive for that child.'

'Keneb, sir, and I will take care of the lass until then, I swear it.' The man then hesitated, freed one hand and gripped Duiker's wrist. 'Sir ...'

'What?'

'I'm – I'm sorry, sir.'

'Your loyalty's to the city you've sworn to defend, Captain—'

'I know sir, but those soldiers on the walls, sir – well, they're as close as they're allowed to get, if you understand me. And they're not happy about it.'

'They're not alone in that. Now get going, Captain Keneb.'

Duiker was the last. When the gate finally emptied, not a single breathing refugee remained outside the walls, barring those he could see well down the road, still seated on the cobbles, unable to move, drawing their last breaths – too far away to retrieve, and it was clear that the Aren soldiers had been given strict orders about how far beyond the gate they were permitted.

Thirty paces from the gate and with the array of guards standing in the gap watching him, Duiker wheeled his horse around one final time. He stared northward, first to the dust cloud now ascending the last, largest barrow, then beyond it, to the glittering spear that was the Whirlwind. His mind's eye took him farther still, north and east, across rivers, across plains and steppes, to a city on a different coast. Yet the effort availed him little. Too much to comprehend, too swift, too immediate this end to that extraordinary, soul-scarring journey.

A chain of corpses, hundreds of leagues long. No, it is all *beyond me, beyond, I now believe, any of us . . .*

He swung his horse around, eyes fixing on that yawning gate and the guards gathered there. They parted to form a path. Duiker tapped his heels into the mare's flanks.

He ignored the soldiers on the wall, even when the triumphant cry burst from them like a beast unchained.

Shadows flowed in silent waves over the barren hills. Apt's glittering eye scanned the horizon for a moment longer, then the demon dipped her elongated head to look down on the boy crouched beside her forelimb.

He too was studying Shadow Realm's eerie landscape, his own single, multifaceted eye glistening beneath the jutting brow ridge.

After a long moment he lifted his head and met her gaze. 'Mother,' he asked, 'is this home?'

A voice spoke from a dozen paces away. 'My colleague ever underestimates this realm's natural inhabitants. Ah, there is the child.'

The boy turned and watched the tall, black-clad man approach. 'Aptorian,' the stranger continued, 'your generous shaping of this lad – no matter how well-meant – will do naught but scar him within, in the years to come.'

Apt clicked and hissed a reply.

'Ah, but you have achieved the opposite, Lady,' the man said. 'For he now belongs to neither.'

The demon spoke again.

The man cocked his head, regarded her for a long moment, then half-smiled. 'Presumptuous of you.' His gaze fell to the boy. 'Very well.' He crouched. 'Hello.'

The boy returned the greeting shyly.

Casting a last irritated glance at Apt, the man offered the child his hand. 'I'm ... Uncle Cotillion—'

'You can't be,' the boy said.

'Oh, and why not?'

'Your eyes – they're different – so small, two fighting to see as one. I think they must be weak. When you approached, you walked through a stone wall and then the trees, rippling the ghost world as if ignorant of its right to dwell here.'

Cotillion's eyes widened. 'Wall? Trees?' He glanced up at Apt. 'Has his mind fled?'

The demon answered at length.

Cotillion paled. 'Hood's breath!' he finally muttered, and when he turned back to the child it was with an expression of awe. 'What is your name, lad?'

'Panek.'

'You possess one, then. Tell me, what else – apart from your name – do you recall of your ... other world?'

'I remember being punished. I was told to stay close to Father—'

'And what did he look like?'

'I don't remember. I don't remember any of their faces. We were waiting to see what they'd do with us. But then we were led away – the children – away. Soldiers pushed my father, dragged him in the opposite direction. I was supposed to stay close, but I went with the children. They punished me – punished all of the children – for not doing what we were told.'

Cotillion's eyes narrowed. 'I don't think your father had much choice, Panek.'

'But the enemy were fathers too, you see. And mothers and grandmothers – they were all so angry with us. They took our clothes. Our sandals. They took everything from us, they were so angry. Then they punished us.'

'And how did they do that?'

'They nailed us to crosses.'

Cotillion said nothing for a long moment. When he finally spoke, his voice was strangely flat. 'You remember that, then.'

'Yes. And I promise to do as I'm told. From now on. Whatever Mother says. I promise.'

'Panek. Listen carefully to your uncle. You weren't punished for not doing what you were told. Listen – this is hard, I know, but try to understand. They hurt you because they could, because there was no-one there who was capable of stopping them. Your father would have tried – I'm sure he did. But, like you, he was helpless. We're here now, with you – your mother and Uncle Cotillion – we're here to make sure you'll never be helpless again. Do you understand?'

Panek looked up at his mother. She clicked softly.

'All right,' the boy said.

'We'll teach each other, lad.'

Panek frowned. 'What can I teach you?'

Cotillion grimaced. 'Teach me what you see ... here, in this realm. Your ghost world, the Shadow Hold that was, the old places that remain—'

'What you walk through unseeing.'

'Aye. I've often wondered why the Hounds never run straight.'

'Hounds?'

'You'll meet them sooner or later, Panek. Cuddly mutts, one and all.'

Panek smiled, revealing sharp fangs. 'I like dogs.'

With a slight flinch, Cotillion said, 'I'm sure they'll like you in turn.' He straightened, faced Apt. 'You're right, you can't do this alone. Let us think on it, Ammanas and I.' He faced the lad again. 'Your mother has other tasks now. Debts to pay. Will you go with her or come with me?'

'Where do you go, Uncle?'

'The other children have been deposited nearby. Would you like to help me get them settled?'

Panek hesitated, then replied, 'I would like to see them again, but not right away. I will go with Mother. The man who asked her to save us needs to be looked after – she explained that. I would like to meet him. Mother says he dreams of me, of when he first saw me.'

'I'm sure he does,' Cotillion muttered. 'Like me, he is haunted by helplessness. Very well, until we meet again.' He shifted his attention one last time, stared long into Apt's eye. 'When I Ascended, Lady, it was to escape the nightmares of feeling...' He grimaced. 'Imagine my surprise that I now thank you for such chains.'

Panek broke in. 'Uncle, do you have any children?'

He winced, looked away. 'A daughter. Of sorts.' He sighed, then smiled wryly. 'We had a falling-out, I'm afraid.'

'You must forgive her.'

'Damned upstart!'

'You said we must teach each other, Uncle.'

Cotillion's eyes widened on the lad, then he shook his head. 'The forgiveness is the other way around, alas.'

'Then I must meet her.'

'Well, anything is possible—'

Apt spoke.

Cotillion scowled. 'That, Lady, was uncalled-for.' He turned away, wrapping his cloak about himself.

After half a dozen strides he paused, glancing back. 'Give Kalam my regards.' A moment later shadows engulfed him.

Panek continued staring. 'Does he imagine,' he asked his mother, 'that he now walks unseen?'

The greased anchor chain rattled smoothly, slipping down into the black, oily water, and *Ragstopper* came to a rest in Malaz Harbour, a hundred yards from the docks. A scatter of dull yellow lights marked the lower quarter's front street, where ancient warehouses interspersed by ramshackle taverns, inns and tenement houses faced the piers. To the north was the ridge that was home to the city's merchants and nobles – the larger estates abutting the cliff wall and its switchback stairs that ascended to Mock's Hold. Few lights were visible in that old bastion, though Kalam could see a pennant flapping heavily in a high wind – too dark to make out its colours.

A shiver of presentiment ran through him at the sight of that pennant. *Someone's here . . . someone important.*

The crew were settling down behind him, grumbling about the late hour of arrival which would prevent them from immediately disembarking into the harbour streets. The Harbourmaster would wait until the morrow before rowing out to inspect the craft and ensure that the sailors were hale – free of infections and the like.

The midnight bell had sounded its atonal note only minutes earlier. *Salk Elan judged rightly, damn him.*

It had never been part of the plan, this stop in Malaz City. Kalam had originally intended to await Fiddler in Unta, where they would finalize the details. Quick Ben had insisted that the sapper could come through via Deadhouse, though the mage was typically evasive about specifics. Kalam had begun to view the Deadhouse option as more of a potential escape route if things went wrong than anything else, and even then as a last recourse. He'd never liked the Azath, had no faith in anything that appeared so benign. Friendly traps were always far deadlier than openly belligerent ones.

There was silence behind him now, and the assassin briefly wondered at how swiftly sleep had come to the men sprawled on the main deck. *Ragstopper* was motionless, cordage and hull murmuring their usual natural noises. Kalam leaned on the forecastle rail, eyes on the city before him, on the dark bulks of ships resting in their berths. The Imperial Pier was off to his right, where the cliff face reached down to the sea. No craft was visible there.

He thought to glance back up at the pennant's dark wing above the Hold, but the effort seemed too much – too dark in any case – and his imagination was ever fuelled by thinking the worse of all he could not know.

And now came sounds from farther out in the bay. Another ship, edging its way through the darkness, another late arrival.

The assassin glanced down at his hands where they rested on the rail. They felt like someone else's, that polished, dark-brown hue of his skin, the pale scars that crossed it here and there – not his own, but the victims of someone else's will.

He shook off the sensation.

The island city's smells drifted out to him. The usual stench of a harbour: sewage warring with rot, brackish water of the sea mixing with, a pungent whiff from the sluggish river that emptied into the bay. His eyes focused again on the dark, snag-toothed grin of the harbour-front buildings. A few

streets in, he knew, occupying one squalid corner amidst tenement blocks and fish-stalls, stood the Deadhouse. Unmentioned and avoided by all denizens of the city, and to all outward appearances completely abandoned, its yard overgrown, its black, rough stones smothered in vines. No lights from the gaping windows in the twin towers.

If anyone can make it, it's Fiddler. The bastard's *always been charmed. A sapper all his life, it seems, with a sapper's extra sense. What would he say if he stood here beside me right now? 'Don't like it, Kal. Something's awry all right. Move those hands of yours ...*"

Kalam frowned, glanced back down at his hands, willing them to lift clear of the rail.

Nothing.

He attempted to step back, but his muscles refused, deaf to his command. Sweat sprang out beneath his clothes, beading the backs of his hands.

A soft voice spoke beside him. 'There's such irony in this, my friend. You see, it's your mind that's betrayed you. The formidable, deadly mind of the assassin Kalam Mekhar.' Salk Elan leaned on the rail beside him, studying the city. 'I've admired you for so long, you know. You're a damned legend, the finest killer the Claw ever had – and lost. Ah, and it's that loss that rankles the most. Had you the will for it, Kalam, you could now be in command of the entire organization – oh, Topper might disagree, and I'll grant you, in some ways he's your superior by far. He would have killed me on the first day, no matter how uncertain he was of whatever risk I might have presented. Even so,' Salk Elan continued after a moment, 'knife to knife, you're his better, friend.

'Another irony for you, Kalam. I was not in Seven Cities to find you – indeed, we knew nothing of your presence there. Until I came across a certain Red Blade who did, that is. She'd been following you since Erhlitan, before you delivered the Book to Sha'ik – did you know you led the Red Blades directly to that witch? Did you know that they succeeded in assassinating her? That Red Blade would have been here with me, in fact, if not for an unfortunate incident in Aren. But I prefer working alone.

'Salk Elan, a name I admit to being proud of. But here and now, of course, my vanity insists that you know my true name, which is Pearl.' He paused, looked around, sighed. 'You threw me but once, with that sly hint that maybe Quick Ben was hiding in your baggage. I almost panicked then, until I realized if that were true, I'd already be dead – sniffed out and fed to the sharks.

'You should never have left the Claw, Kalam. We don't deal with rejection very well. The Empress wants you, you know, wants a conversation with you, in fact. Before skinning you alive, I imagine. Alas, things aren't so simple, are they?

'And so, here we are ...'

In his peripheral vision, Kalam saw the man draw forth a dagger. 'It's those immutable laws within the Claw, you see. One in particular, which I'm sure you well know ...'

The blade sank deep into Kalam's side with a dull, distant pain. Pearl withdrew the weapon. 'Oh, not fatal, just lots of blood. A weakening, if you will. Malaz City is quiet tonight, don't you think? Not surprising – there's something in the air – every cutpurse, guttersnipe and thug can feel it, and they're one and all keeping their heads low. Three Hands await you, Kalam, eager for the hunt to start. That immutable law, Kalam ... in the Claw, we deal with our own.'

Hands gripped the assassin. 'You'll awaken once you hit the water, friend. Granted, it's something of a swim, especially with the armour you're wearing. And the blood won't help – this bay's notorious for sharks, isn't it. But I've great confidence in you, Kalam. I know you'll make it to dry land. That far, at least. After that, well.. .'

He felt himself being lifted, edged over the rail. He stared down at the black water below.

'A damned shame,' Pearl gasped close to his ear, 'about the captain and this crew, but I've no choice, as I'm sure you understand. Farewell, Kalam Mekhar.'

The assassin struck the water with a soft splash. Pearl stared down as the disturbance settled. His confidence in Kalam wavered. The man was in chain armour, after all. Then he shrugged, drew forth a pair of throat-stickers and swung to face the motionless figures lying on the main deck. 'A good man's work is never done, alas,' he said, stepping forward.

The shape that emerged from the shadows to face him was huge, angular, black-limbed. A single eye gleamed from the long-snouted head, and hovering dimly behind that head was a rider, his face a mockery of his mount's.

Pearl stepped back, offered a smile. 'Ah, an opportunity to thank you for your efforts against the Semk. I knew not where you came from then, nor how you've come to be here now, or why, but please accept my gratitude—'

'Kalam,' the rider whispered, 'He was here but a moment ago.'

Pearl's eyes narrowed. 'Ah, now I understand. You weren't following *me,* were you? No, of course not. How silly of me! Well, to answer your question, child, Kalam has gone into the city—'

The demon's lunge interrupted him. Pearl ducked beneath the snapping jaws – and directly into the sweeping foreclaw. The impact threw the Claw twenty feet, crashing him up against a battened-down dory. His shoulder dislocated with a stab of pain. Pearl rolled, forcing himself into a sitting position. He watched the demon stalk towards him.

'I see I've met my match,' Pearl whispered. 'Very well.' He reached under his shirt. 'Try this one, then.'

The tiny bottle shattered on the deck between them. Smoke billowed, began coalescing.

'The Kenryll'ah looks eager, wouldn't you say? Well –' he struggled to his feet – 'I think I'll leave you two to it. There's a certain tavern in Malaz City I've been dying to see.'

He gestured and a warren opened, swept over him, and when it closed, Pearl was gone.

Apt watched the Imperial demon acquire its form, a creature twice its weight, hulking and bestial.

The child reached down and patted Apt's lone shoulder. 'Let's be quick with this one, shall we?'

A chorus of shudders and explosions of wood awoke the captain. He blinked in the darkness as *Ragstopper* pitched wildly about him. Voices screamed on deck. Groaning, the captain pushed himself off the bed, sensing a clarity in his mind that he'd not known in months, a freedom of action and thought that told unequivocally that Pearl's influence was gone.

He clambered to his cabin door, limbs weak with disuse, and made his way into the passage.

Emerging on deck, he found himself in a crowd of cowering sailors. Two horrific creatures were battling directly in front of them, the larger of the two a mass of shredded flesh, unable to match its opponent's lightning speed. Its wild flailing with a massive double-bladed axe had reduced the deck and the rails to pulp. An earlier swing had chopped through the mast, and though it remained upright, snagged in cordage somewhere high above them, it leaned precariously, its weight canting the ship hard over.

'Captain!'

'Have the lads drag the surviving dories clear, Palet, and back up astern – we'll lower 'em from there.'

'Aye, sir!' The acting First Mate snapped out the commands, then swung back to offer the captain a grin. 'Glad you're back, Carther—'

'Shut your face, Palet – that's Malaz City out there and I drowned years ago, remember?' He squinted at the warring demons. 'Ragstopper's not going to survive this—'

'But the loot—'

'To Hood with that! We can always raise her – but we need to be alive to do it. Now, let's lend a hand with those dories – we're taking on water and

going down fast.'

'Beru fend! The sea's crawling with sharks!'

Fifty yards farther out, the captain of the fast trader stood with his First Mate, both of them straining to make out the source of the commotion ahead.

'Back oars,' the captain said. 'Full stop.'

'Aye, sir.'

'That ship's going down. Assemble rescue crews, lower the boats—'

Horse hooves clomped on the main deck behind them. Both men turned. The First Mate stepped forward. 'You there! What in Mael's name do you think you're doing? How did you get that damned animal on deck?'

The woman tightened the girth-strap another notch, then swung up into the saddle. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'But I cannot wait.'

Sailors and marines scattered as she drove the horse forward. The creature cleared the side rail and leapt out into darkness. A loud splash followed a moment later.

The First Mate turned back to his captain, jaw hanging.

'Get Ship's Mage and a goat,' the captain snapped.

'Sir?'

'Anyone brave and stupid enough to do what she just did has earned our every assistance. Have Ship's Mage clear a path through the sharks and whatever else might await her. Be quick about it!'

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Every throne is an arrow-butt.

Kellanved

Beneath the whirlwind's towering spire was a lower billowing of dust as the massive army decamped. Borne on wayward gusts, the ochre clouds spread out from the oasis, settling here and there among the weathered folds of ruins. The air was lit gold on all sides, as if the desert had at last unveiled its memories of wealth and glory, only to reveal them for what they truly were.

Sha'ik stood on the flat roof of a wooden watchtower near the palace concourse, the scurrying efforts of an entire city beneath her almost unnoticed as she stared into the opaqueness to the south. The young girl she had adopted kneeled close by, watching her new mother with sharp, steady eyes.

The ladder below creaked incessantly to someone's laboured ascent, Sha'ik slowly realized, and as she turned she saw Heboric's head and shoulders emerge through the trap. The ex-priest clambered onto the platform and laid an invisible hand on the girl's head before turning to squint at Sha'ik.

'L'oric's the one to watch,' Heboric said. 'The other two think they're subtle, but they're anything but.'

'L'oric,' she murmured, returning her gaze to the south. 'What is your sense of him?'

'You've knowledge that surpasses mine, lass—'

'Nevertheless.'

'I think he senses the bargain.'

'Bargain?'

Heboric moved to stand beside her and leaned his tattooed forearms on the thin wooden railing. 'The one the goddess made with you. The one that proves that a rebirth did not in truth occur—'

'Did it not, Heboric?'

'No. No child chooses to be born, no child has any say in the matter. You had both. Sha'ik has not been reborn, she has been *re-made*. L'oric may well seize on this, believing it to be a gap in your armour.'

'He risks the wrath of the goddess, then.'

'Aye, and I don't think he's ignorant of that, lass, which is why he needs to be watched. Carefully.'

They were silent for a time, both staring out into the south's impenetrable shroud. Eventually Heboric cleared his throat. 'Perhaps, with your new gifts, you can answer some questions.'

'Such as?'

'When did Dryjhna choose you?'

'What do you mean?'

'When did the manipulation begin? Here in Raraku? Skullcup? Or on a distant continent? When did the goddess first cast her gaze upon you, lass?'

'She never did.'

Heboric started. 'That seems—'

'Unlikely? Yes, but it is the truth. The journey was mine, and mine alone. You must understand, even goddesses cannot foresee unexpected deaths, those twists of mortality, decisions taken, paths followed or not followed. Sha'ik Elder had the gift of prophecy, but such a gift, when given, is no more than a seed. It grows in the freedom of a human soul. Dryjhna was greatly disturbed by Sha'ik's visions. Visions that made no sense. A hint of peril, but nothing certain, nothing at all. Besides,' she added with a shrug, 'strategy and tactics are anathema to the Apocalypse.'

Heboric grimaced. 'That doesn't bode well.'

'Wrong. We are free to devise our own.'

'Even if the goddess did not guide you, someone or something did. Else Sha'ik would never have been given those visions.'

'Now you speak of fate. Argue that with your fellow scholars, Heboric. Not every mystery can be unravelled, much as you believe otherwise. Sorry if that pains you ...'

'Not half as sorry as I am. But it occurs to me that even as mortals are but pieces on a gameboard, so too are the gods.'

'"Elemental forces in opposition,"' she said, smiling.

Heboric's brows rose, then he scowled. 'A quote. A familiar one—'

'It should be. It's carved into the Imperial Gate in Unta, after all. Kellanved's own words, as a means to justify the balance of destruction with creation – the expansion of the Empire, in all its hungry glory.'

'Hood's breath!' the old man hissed.

'Have I sent your mind spinning in other directions, Heboric?'

'Aye.'

'Well, save your breath. The subject of your next treatise – no doubt that handful of obscure old fools will dance in excitement.'

'Old fools?'

'Your fellow scholars. Your readers, Heboric'

'Ah.'

They were silent again for some time, until the ex-priest spoke once more. 'What will you do?' he asked softly.

'With what has happened out there?'

'With what's still happening. Korbolo Dom reaping senseless slaughter in your name—'

'In the name of the goddess,' she corrected, hearing the brittle anger in her own voice. She'd already exchanged sharp words with Leoman on this subject.

'Word of the "rebirth" has probably reached him—'

'No, it has not. I have sealed Raraku, Heboric. The storm raised around us can scour flesh from bones. Not even a T'lan Imass could survive the passage.'

'Yet you have made an announcement,' the old man said. 'The Whirlwind.'

'Which has raised in Korbolo Dom doubts. And fears. He is very eager to complete the task he's chosen. He's still unfettered, and so is free to answer his obsessions—'

'And so, what will you do? Aye, we can march, but it will take months to reach the Aren Plain, and by then Korbolo will have given Tavore all the justification she needs to deliver a ruthless punishment. The rebellion was bloody, but your sister will make what's already happened seem like a scratch on the backside.'

'You assume she is my superior, Heboric, don't you? In tactics—'

'There's precedent for how far your sister will go in cruelty, lass,' he growled. 'Witness you standing here ...'

'And there lies my greatest advantage, old man. Tavore believes she will face a desert witch whom she has never met. Ignorance will not sway her contempt for such a creature. Yet I am not ignorant of *my* enemy ...'

A subtle change had come to the distant roar of the Whirlwind towering behind them. Sha'ik smiled. Heboric's sense of that change came moments later. He turned. 'What is happening?'

'It will not take us months to reach Aren, Heboric. Have you not wondered what the Whirlwind is?'

The ex-priest's blind eyes widened as he faced that pillar of dust and wind. Sha'ik wondered how the man's preternatural senses perceived the

phenomenon, but his next words made it clear that whatever he saw was true. 'By the gods, it's *toppling!'*

'Dryjhna's Warren, Heboric, our whirling road to the south.'

'Will it take us there in time, Fel— Sha'ik? In time to stop Korbolo Dom's madness?'

She did not answer, for it was already too late.

As Duiker rode in through the gates, gauntleted hands reached out to grasp the halter and reins, dragging his mare to a stuttering halt. A smaller hand closed on the historian's wrist, tugging with something like desperation. He looked down, and saw in Nether's face a sickly dread that poured ice into his veins.

'To the tower,' she pleaded. 'Quickly!'

A strange murmuring was building from Aren's walls, a sound of darkness that filled the dusty air. Sliding down from the saddle, Duiker felt his heart begin to thunder. Nether's hand pulled him through the crowd of Garrison Guards and refugees. He felt other hands reach out, touch lightly as if seeking a blessing or conferring one, then slip past.

An arched doorway suddenly yawned before him, leading to a gloomy landing with stone steps rising along the inside of the tower wall. The sound from the city walls was building to a roar, a wordless cry of outrage, horror and anguish. It echoed with mad intent within the tower, and rose in timbre with each step that the warlock and the historian climbed.

On the middle landing she swept him past the T-shaped arrow slits, edging them both behind the pair of bowmen pressed against the narrow windows, then on, up the worn stairs. Neither archer even so much as noticed them.

As they neared the shaft of bright light directly beneath the roof hatch, a quavering voice reached down.

'There's too many ... I can do nothing, no, the gods forgive me – too many, too many ...'

Nether ascended the shaft of light, Duiker following. They emerged onto the broad platform. Three figures stood at the outer wall. The one on the left Duiker recognized as Mallick Rel – the adviser he had last seen in Hissar – his silks billowing in the hot wind. The man beside him was probably High Fist Pormqual, tall, wiry, slope-shouldered and wearing clothes that would beggar a king, his pale hands skittering across the top of the battlement like trapped birds. To his right stood a soldier in functional armour, a tore on his left arm denoting his commander's rank. He held his burly arms wrapped around himself, as if trying to crush his own bones. The stress bound within him seemed about to explode.

Near the hatch sat Nil, a disarrayed jumble of limbs. The young warlock swung a grey, aged face towards Duiker. Nether swept down to wrap her brother in a fierce hug that she seemed unwilling or unable to relax.

The soldiers lining the walls to either side were screaming now, a sound that cut the air like Hood's own scythe.

The historian went to the wall beside the commander. Duiker's hands reached out to grip the sun-baked stone of the merlon. Following the rapt gaze of the others, he could barely draw breath. Panic surged through him as his eyes took in the scene on the slope of the closest burial mound.

Coltaine.

Above a contracting mass of less than four hundred soldiers, three standards waved: the Seventh's; the polished, articulated dog skeleton of the Foolish Dog Clan; the Crow's black wings surmounting a bronze disc that flashed in the sunlight. Defiant and proud, the bearers continued to hold them high.

On all sides, pressing in with bestial frenzy, were Korbolo Dom's thousands, a mass of footsoldiers devoid of all discipline, interested only in slaughter. Mounted companies rode past them along both visible edges, surging into the gap between the city's walls and the mound – though not riding close enough to come within bow range from Aren's archers.

Korbolo Dom's own guard and, no doubt, the renegade Fist himself had moved into position atop the mound behind the last one, and a platform was being raised, as if to ensure a clear view of the events playing out on the nearer barrow.

The distance was not enough to grant mercy to the witnesses on the tower or along the city's wall. Duiker saw Coltaine there, amidst a knot of Mincer's engineers and a handful of Lull's marines, his round shield a shattered mess on his left arm, his lone long-knife snapped to the length of a short sword in his right hand, his feather cloak glistening as if brushed with tar. The historian saw Commander Bult, guiding the retreat towards the hill's summit. Cattle-dogs surged and leapt around the Wickan veteran like a frantic bodyguard, even as arrows swept through them in waves. Among the creatures one stood out, huge, seemingly indomitable, pin-cushioned with arrows, yet fighting on.

The horses were gone. The Weasel Clan was gone. The Foolish Dog warriors were but a score in number, surrounding half a dozen old men and horsewives – the very last of a dwindled, cut-away heart. Of the Crow, it was clear that Coltaine and Bult were the last.

Soldiers of the Seventh, few with any armour left, held themselves in a solid ring around the others. Many of them no longer raised weapons, yet stood their ground even as they were cut to pieces. No quarter was given, every soldier who fell with wounds was summarily butchered – their helmets torn off, their forearms shattered as they sought to ward off the attacks, their skulls crumpling to multiple blows.

The stone beneath Duiker's hands had gone slick, sticky. Iron lances of pain shot up his arms. He barely noticed.

With a wrenching effort, the historian pulled back, reaching out red fingers to grip Pormqual—

The garrison commander blocked him, held him back.

The High Fist saw Duiker, flinched away. 'You do not understand!' he screamed. 'I cannot save them! Too many! Too many!'

'You can, you bastard! A sortie can drive right to that mound – a cordon, damn you!'

'No! We'll be crushed! I must not!'

The commander's low growl reached Duiker. 'You're right, Historian. But he won't do it. The High Fist won't let us save them—'

Duiker struggled to free himself of the man's grip but was pushed back.

'For Hood's sake!' the commander snapped. 'We've tried – we've all tried —'

Mallick Rel stepped close, said softly, 'My heart weeps, Historian. The High Fist cannot be swayed—'

'This is murder!'

'For which Korbolo Dom shall pay, and dearly.'

Duiker spun around, lurched back to the wall.

They were dying. There, almost within reach – no, within a soldier's reach. Anguish closed a black fist in the historian's gut. *I cannot watch.*

Yet I must.

He saw fewer than a hundred soldiers still upright, but it had become a slaughter – the only battle that remained was among Korbolo's forces for the chance of delivering fatal blows and raising grisly trophies with triumphant shrieks. The Seventh were falling, and falling, using naught but flesh and bone to shield their leaders – the ones who had led them across a continent, to die now, almost within the shadow of Aren's high walls.

And on those walls was ranged an army, ten thousand fellow soldiers to witness this, the greatest crime ever committed by a Malazan High Fist.

How Coltaine had managed to get this far was beyond Duiker's ability to comprehend. He was seeing the end of a battle that must have run without cessation for days – a battle that had ensured the survival of the refugees – *and this is why that dust cloud was so slow to approach.*

The last of the Seventh vanished beneath swarming bodies. Bult stood with his back to the standard bearer, a Dhobri tulwar in each hand. A mob closed on him and drove lances into the veteran, sticking him as they would a cornered boar. Even then he tried to rise up, slashing out with a tulwar to chop into the leg of a man – who reeled back howling. But the lances stabbed deep, pushed the Wickan back, pinned him to the ground. Blades flashed down on him, hacking him to death.

The standard bearer left his position – the standard itself propped up between corpses – and leapt forward in a desperate effort to reach his commander. A blade neatly decapitated him, sending his head toppling back to join the bloody jumble at the standard's base, and thus did Corporal List die, having experienced countless mock deaths all those months ago at Hissar.

The Foolish Dog's position vanished beneath a press of bodies, the standard toppling moments later. Bloody scalps were lifted and waved about, the trophies spraying red rain.

Surrounded by the last of the engineers and marines, Coltaine fought on. His defiance lasted but a moment longer before Korbolo Dom's warriors killed the last defender, then swallowed up Coltaine himself, burying him in their mindless frenzy.

A huge arrow-studded cattle-dog darted to where Coltaine had gone down, but then a lance speared the beast, raising it high. It writhed as it slid down the shaft, and even then the creature delivered one final death to the enemy gripping the weapon, by tearing out the soldier's throat.

Then it too was gone.

The Crow standard wavered, leaned to one side, then pitched down, vanishing in the press.

Duiker stood unmoving, disbelieving.

Coltaine.

A high-pitched wail rose behind the historian. He slowly turned. Nether still held Nil as if he were a babe, but her head was tilted back, raised

heavenward, her eyes wide.

A shadow swept over them.

Crows.

And to Sormo the Elder warlock, there on the wall of Unta, there came eleven crows – eleven – to take the great man's soul, for no single creature could hold it all. Eleven.

The sky above Aren was filled with crows, a black sea of wings, closing from all sides.

Nether's wail grew louder and louder still, as if her own soul was being ripped out through her throat.

Shock jolted through Duiker. It's *not done – it's not over*— He spun round, saw the cross being raised, saw the still living man nailed to it.

'They'll not free him!' Nether screamed. She was suddenly at his side and staring out at the barrow. She tore at her hair, clawed at her own scalp, until blood streamed down her face. Duiker grasped her wrists – so thin, so childlike in his hands – and pulled them away before she could reach her own eyes.

Kamist Reloe stood on the platform, Korbolo Dom at his side. Sorcery blossomed – a virulent, wild wave that surged up and crashed against the approaching crows. Black shapes spun and tumbled from the sky—

'No!' Nether shrieked, writhing in Duiker's arms, seeking to fling herself over the wall.

The cloud of crows scattered, reformed, sought to approach once again.

Kamist Reloe obliterated hundreds more.

'Release his soul! From the flesh! *Release it!'*

Beside them, the garrison commander turned and called to one of his aides in a voice of ice, 'Get me Squint, Corporal. Now!'

The aide did not bother darting down the stairs – he simply went to the far wall, leaned out and screamed, 'Squint! Up here, damn you!'

Another wave of sorcery swept more crows from the sky. In silence, they regrouped once again.

The roar from Aren's walls had stilled. Now only silence held the air.

Nether had collapsed against the historian, a child in his arms. Duiker could see Nil curled and motionless on the platform near the hatch – either unconscious or dead. He had wet himself, the puddle spreading out around him.

Boots thumped on the stairs.

The aide said to the commander, 'He's been helping the refugees, sir. I don't think he has any idea what's going on...'

Duiker turned again to look out at the lone figure nailed to the cross. He still lived – they would not let him die, would not free his soul, and Kamist Reloe knew precisely what he was doing, knew the full horror of his crime, as he methodically destroyed the vessels for that soul. On all sides, screaming warriors pressed close, seething on the barrow like insects.

Objects started striking the figure on the cross, leaving red stains. *Pieces of flesh, gods – pieces of flesh, – what's left of the army* – this was a level of cruelty that left Duiker cowering inside.

'Over here, Squint!' he heard the commander growl. A figure pushed to Duiker's side, short, squat, grey-haired. His eyes, buried in a nest of wrinkles, were fixed on that distant figure. 'Mercy,' he whispered.

'Well?' the commander demanded.

'That's half a thousand paces, Blistig—'

'I know.'

'Might take more than one shot, sir.'

'Then get started, damn you.'

The old soldier, wearing a uniform that looked as if it had not been washed or repaired in decades, unslung the longbow from one shoulder. He gathered the string, stepped into the bow's plane, bent it hard over one thigh. His limbs shook as he edged the string's loop into its niche. Then he straightened up and studied the arrows in the quiver strapped to his hip.

Another wave of sorcery struck the crows.

After a long moment, Squint selected an arrow. 'I'll try for the chest. Biggest target, sir, and enough good hits and that'll do the poor soul.'

'Another word, Squint,' Blistig whispered, 'and I'll have your tongue.'

The soldier nocked the arrow. 'Clear me some space, then.'

Nether was limp in Duiker's arms as he dragged her back a step.

The man's bow, even strung, was as tall as he was. His forearms as he drew the string back were like hemp ropes, bundled and twisted and taut. The string brushed his stubbled jawline as he completed the draw, then locked it in place with a slow, even exhalation.

Duiker saw the man tremble suddenly, and his eyes widened, revealing themselves for the first time – black, small marbles in red-streaked nests.

Raw fear edged Blistig's voice. 'Squint—'

'That's got to be Coltaine, sir!' the old man gasped. 'You want me to kill Coltaine—'

'Squint!'

Nether raised her head and reached out one bloody hand in supplication. 'Release him. *Please.'*

The old man studied her a moment. Tears streamed down his face. The trembling stilled – the bow itself had not moved an inch.

'Hood's breath!' Duiker hissed. *He's weeping. He can't aim – the bastard can't aim—*

The bowstring thrummed. The long shaft cut through the sky.

'Oh, gods!' Squint moaned. 'Too high – too high!'

It rose, swept through the massed crows untouched and unwavering, began arcing down.

Duiker could have sworn that Coltaine looked up then, lifted his gaze to greet that gift, as the iron head impacted his forehead, shattered the bone, sank deep into his brain and killed him instantly. His head snapped back between the spars of wood, then the arrow was through.

The warriors on the barrow's slopes flinched back.

The crows shook the air with their eerie cries and plunged down towards the sagging figure on the cross, sweeping over the warriors crowding the slopes. The sorcery that battered at them was shunted aside, scattered by whatever force – *Coltaine's soul?* – now rose to join the birds.

The cloud descended on Coltaine, swallowing him entire and covering the cross itself – at that distance they were to Duiker like flies swarming a piece of flesh.

And when they rose, exploding skyward, the warleader of the Crow Clan was gone.

Duiker staggered, leaned hard against the stone wall. Nether slipped down through his motionless arms, her blood-matted hair hiding her face as she curled around his feet.

'I killed him,' Squint moaned. 'I killed Coltaine. Who took that man's life? A broken old soldier of the High Fist's army – he killed Coltaine ... Oh, Beru, have mercy on my soul...'

Duiker wrapped the old man in his arms and held him fiercely. The bow clattered on the platform's wooden slats. The historian felt the man crumpling against him as if his bones had turned to dust, as if centuries stole into him with each ragged breath.

Commander Blistig gripped the bowman by the back of the collar and yanked him upright. 'Before the day's through, you bastard,' he hissed, 'ten

thousand soldiers will be voicing your name.' The words shook. 'Like a prayer, Squint, like a Hood-damned prayer.'

The historian squeezed his eyes shut. It had become a day to hold in his arms broken figures.

But *who will hold me?*

Duiker opened his eyes, raised his head. High Fist Pormqual's mouth was moving, as if in a silent plea for forgiveness. Shock was written on the man's thin, oiled face and, as he met the historian's gaze, a flash of raw fear.

Out on the barrow Korbolo Dom's army was stirring, like reeds in eddies, a restless, meaningless motion. The aftermath was now upon them. Voices rose, wordless cries, but they were too few to break the dreadful silence and its growing power.

The crows were gone, the crossed spars of wood stood empty, rising above the masses with their blood-streaked shafts.

Overhead, the sky had begun to die.

Duiker's gaze returned to Pormqual. The High Fist seemed to shrink into Mallick Rel's shadow. He shook his head as if to deny the day.

Thrice denied, High Fist.

Coltaine is dead. They are all dead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I saw the sun's bolt
arc an unerring path
to the man's forehead.
As it struck, the crows
converged like night
drawing breath.

Dog Chain
Seglora

Faint ripples licked the garbage-studded mud beneath the docks. Night insects danced just beyond the water's reach, and the bank itself seethed in the egg-laying frenzy of some kind of eels. In their thousands, black and gleaming, the small creatures writhed beneath the dancing insects. This silent breaching of the harbour's shore had for generations passed almost unnoticed by human eyes – a mercy granted only because the eels were wholly unpalatable.

From the darkness beyond came the sound of cascading water. The ripples that reached shore from that commotion were larger, more agitated, the only indication that a stranger had arrived to disturb the scene.

Kalam stumbled ashore, collapsing onto mud that swarmed beneath him. Warm blood still leaked between the fingers of his right hand where it pressed against the knife wound. The assassin wore no shirt, and his chain armour was even now settling somewhere in the mud bottom of Malaz Bay behind him, leaving him with only buckskin leggings and moccasins.

In clambering out of the armour during his sudden plunge into the deep, he had been forced to pull off his belt and knife harness. In his desperate need to return to the surface, to draw air into his lungs, he'd let everything slip from his grasp.

Leaving him now unarmed.

Somewhere out in the bay a ship was being torn apart, the savage noises drifting across the water. Kalam wondered at that, but only briefly. He had other things on his mind.

Faint nips told him that the eels were resenting his intrusion. Struggling to slow his breathing, he squirmed farther up the slimy bank. Broken crockery dug into his flesh as he made his way onto the first of the stone breakwaters. He rolled onto his back and stared up at the seaweed-bearded underside of the pier. A moment later he closed his eyes, began concentrating.

The bleeding in his side slowed to a thin trickle, then ceased.

A few minutes later he sat up and began pulling off the eels that clung like leeches, flinging them out into the darkness where he could hear the skittering of the harbour's rats. The creatures were closing in, and the assassin had heard enough whispered tales to know he was anything but safe from the fearless hordes in this underworld.

Kalam could wait no longer. He pushed himself up into a crouch, eyeing the ragged piles that rose beyond the breakwater. If the tide had been in, the massive bronze rings bolted three-quarters of the way up those wooden boles would have been within reach. Black pitch coated the piles except where ships had been thrown against them, leaving gaping dents of raw, water-soaked wood.

Only one way up, then . . .

The assassin made his way along the base of the barrier until he stood opposite a merchant trader. The wide-bellied ship lay canted on its side in the mud. A thick hemp rope stretched from its bow to one of the brass rings high on the pile.

Under normal circumstances the climb would have been a simple one, but even with the inner discipline that was part of a Claw's training, Kalam could not prevent fresh blood welling from the wound in his side as he made his way up the rope. He felt himself weakening as he worked his way

closer to the ring, and when he reached it he paused, limbs shaking, while he sought to recover his strength.

There had been no time for thought since Salk Elan had pitched him over the side, and none now. Cursing his own stupidity was a waste of time. Killers awaited him in Malaz City's dark, narrow streets and alleys. His next few hours would, in all likelihood, be his last this side of Hood's Gates.

Kalam had no intention of being easy prey.

Crouched against the huge ring, he worked to slow his breathing once more, to still the seep of blood from his side and the countless leech-wounds.

Eyes on the warehouse roofs with sorcery-enhanced vision, and I've not even a shirt to hide my body's heat. They know I'm wounded, a challenge to the higher disciplines – I doubt even Surly in her prime could manage a cooling of flesh in these straits. Can I?

Once more he closed his eyes. *Draw the blood from the surface, draw it down to hide within muscle, close to bone. Every breath must be ice, every touch upon cobble and stone a matching of temperature. No residue in passage, no bloom in movement. What will they expect of a wounded man?*

Not *this.*

He opened his eyes, released one hand from the ring and pressed his forearm against the pitted metal. It felt warm.

Time to move.

The top of the pile was within easy reach. Kalam straightened, slowly pulling himself onto the guano-crusted surface. Front Street stretched out before him. Cargo carts crowded the locked warehouse doors facing onto the street, the nearest one less than twenty paces away.

To run would be to invite death, because his body could not adjust to changes in temperature fast enough and the bloom would be unmissable.

One of those eels has crawled too far, and is about to crawl farther still. Flat on his belly, Kalam edged forward onto the damp cobblestones, his

face against them as he sent his breath down beneath him.

Sorcery makes a hunter lazy, tuned only to what they expect will be obvious, given their enhanced senses. They forget the game of shadows, the play of darkness, the most subtle telltale signs ... I *hope.*

He could not look up, but he knew that he was in truth completely exposed, like a worm crossing a flagstone path. A part of his mind threatened to shriek its panic, but the assassin crushed it down. Higher discipline was a ruthless master – of his own mind, his own body, his own soul.

His greatest dread was a break in the overcast sky above the city. The moon had become his enemy, and should it awaken, even the laziest of watchers could not fail to see the shadow Kalam would throw across the cobbles.

Minutes passed as he slid his agonizingly slow way across the street. The city beyond was silent, unnaturally so. A hunters' maze, prepared for him should he manage to reach it. A thought slipped through – *I've been spotted already, but why spoil the game? This hunt's to be a protracted pleasure, something to satisfy the brotherhood's thirst for vengeance. After all, why prepare a maze if you kill your victim before he can even reach it?*

The bitter logic of that was like a hot dagger in his chest, threatening to shatter his camouflage more thoroughly than anything else could. Yet he managed to slow his rise from the street, drawing and holding his breath before looking up.

He was beneath the cart, the top of his head brushing the flatbed's underside.

He paused. They were expecting a contest of subtlety, but sleight of hand was only one of Kalam's talents. *Always an advantage, those other, unexpected ones* . . . The assassin slipped forward, cleared the first wagon, then the next three before coming to the warehouse doors.

The cargo entrance was of course huge, two sliding palisade-like panels, now chained together with a massive padlock. To one side of them,

however, was a smaller side door, also padlocked.

Kalam darted to it and flattened himself against the weathered wood. Both hands closed on the padlock.

There was nothing subtle in the brute strength the assassin possessed. While the padlock itself resisted the twisting force he delivered, the fittings that held it could not. His body pressing against the lock and latch muffled the splintering sounds.

Lock and fittings came away in his hands. Cradling them, Kalam reached out and pulled the door back just enough to let him slip through into the darkness beyond.

A rapid search through the main chamber led him to a large tool rack. He collected a pair of pick-tongs, a hatchet, a burlap sack of cloth-tacks, and a barely serviceable work-knife, its tip broken and its edge heavily nicked. He found a blacksmith's leather workshirt and slipped it on. In the backroom, he discovered a door that opened onto the alley behind the warehouse.

The Deadhouse, he judged, was about six streets away. *But Salk Elan knows – and they'll be waiting for me. I'd have to be an idiot to make straight for it – and they know that, as well.*

Slipping his various makeshift weapons into the shirt's tool-loops, Kalam unlatched the door, edged it open a crack and peered out. Seeing no movement, he pushed it open a few inches more, scanning the nearest rooftops, then the sky.

No-one, and the clouds were a solid cloak. Faint light bled from a few shuttered windows, which had the effect of deepening the gloom everywhere else. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked.

He stepped outside and padded down one edge of the crate-littered alley.

A pool of deeper darkness occupied an alcove near the alley mouth ahead. Kalam's eyes found it, locked on it. He pulled out his knife and hatchet and without pause swept straight for it.

The darkness poured its sorcery over him as he plunged into the alcove, his attack so sudden, so unexpected, that the two figures within had no time to draw weapons. The brutal blade of the work-knife tore out one man's throat. The hatchet chopped down to crush a clavicle and snap ribs. He released that weapon and slapped the palm of his left hand over the man's mouth as he drove the head back to crunch against the wall. The other Claw – a woman – slid down with a wet gurgling sound.

A moment later Kalam was searching their bodies, collecting throwing stars, throwing knives, two braces of short, wide-bladed stickers, a garrotte and the most cherished prize of all, a ribless Claw crossbow, screw-loaded, compact and deadly – if only at close range. Eight quarrels accompanied it, each one with an iron head that glistened with the poison called White Paralt.

Kalam appropriated the thin, black cloak from the man's corpse, pulling up its hood with its gauze vents positioned over his ears. The projecting cowl was also of gauze, ensuring peripheral vision.

The sorcery was fading as he completed his accoutrements, revealing that at least one of his victims had been a mage. *Damned sloppy – Topper's letting* them *get soft.*

He emerged from the alcove, raised his head and sniffed the air. A Hand's link had been broken – they would know that trouble had arrived, and would even now be slowly, cautiously closing in.

Kalam smiled. *You wanted a quarry on the run. Sorry to disappoint you.*

He set out into the night, hunting Claw.

The Hand's leader cocked his head, then stepped into the clear. A moment later two figures emerged from the alley and closed to confer.

'Blood's been spilled,' the leader murmured. 'Topper shall be—'

A soft clicking made him turn. 'Ah, now we learn the details,' the man said, watching their cloaked companion approach.

'The killer has arrived,' the newcomer growled.

'I am about to pluck Topper's strand—'

'Good, it's time he understood.'

'What—'

Both of the leader's companions fell to the cobbles. An enormous fist connected with the leader's face. Bone and cartilage crunched. The leader blinked unseeing eyes that filled with blood. With septum lodged in his forebrain, he crumpled.

Kalam crouched down to whisper in the dead man's ear. 'I know you can hear me, Topper. Two Hands left. Run and hide – I'll still find you.'

He straightened, retrieved his weapons.

The corpse at his feet gurgled a wet laugh and the assassin looked down as a spectral voice emerged from the dead man's lips. 'Welcome back, Kalam. Two Hands, you said? Not any more, old friend—'

'Scared you, did I?'

'Salk Elan appears to have let you off too easily. I shall not be as kind, I'm afraid—'

'I know where you are, Topper, and I'm coming for you.'

There was a long silence, then the corpse spoke one last time. 'By all means, my friend.'

The Imperial Warren was holed like cheesecloth that night, as Hand after Hand of Claw pushed through into the city. One such portal opened directly in a lone man's path – and the five figures announced their arrival with gasping breaths and splashed blood, the swift and as swiftly done noises of dying. Not one had managed more than a step onto the slick cobbles of Malaz City before their flesh began cooling in the gentle night.

Screams echoed down streets and alleys as denizens foolish enough to brave the open paid for their temerity with their lives. The Claw took no more chances.

The game that Kalam had turned, turned yet again.

The mosaic at their feet was endless, the multicoloured stones creating a pattern that defied comprehension, the strange floor stretching away to every horizon. The echo of their boots was muted and faintly sonorous.

Fiddler hitched his crossbow over one shoulder, with a shrug. 'We'd see trouble from a league away,' he said.

'You are all betraying the Azath,' Iskaral Pust hissed, pacing in circles around the group. 'The Jhag belongs beneath a root-webbed mound. That was the deal, the agreement, the scheme...' His voice fell away briefly, then resumed in a different tone. 'What agreement? Did Shadowthrone receive any answers to his query? Did the Azath reveal its ancient, stony face? No. Silence was the reply – to all. My master could have pronounced his intention to defecate on the House's portal and still the reply would not have changed. Silence. Well, it certainly *seemed* there was a consensus. No objections were voiced, were they? No, not at all. Certain assumptions were necessary, oh yes, very necessary. And in the end, there was a sort of victory, was there not? All but for that Jhag there in the Trell's arms.' He stopped, panting as he regained his breath. 'Gods, we are walking for ever!'

'We should begin our journey,' Apsalar said.

'I'm for that,' Fiddler muttered. 'Only, which direction?'

Rellock had knelt down to study the mosaic tiles. They were the only source of light – overhead was pitch black. Each tile was no larger than a hand's width. The glow they cast pulsed in a slow but steady rhythm. The old fisherman now grunted.

'Father?'

'The pattern here—' He pointed to one tile in particular. 'That mottled line ...'

Fiddler crouched down and studied the floor. 'If that's a track or something, it's a crooked one.'

'A track?' The fisherman looked up. 'No, here, along this side. That's the Kanese coastline.'

'What?'

The man ran one blunt fingertip down the ragged line. 'Starts on the Quon coast, down to Kan, then up to Cawn Vor – and there, that's Kartool Island, and southeast, there, in the tile's centre, that's Malaz Island.'

'You're trying to tell me that here, on this one tile at our feet, is mapped most of the Quon Tali continent?' Yet even as he asked, the pattern resolved itself, and before him was indeed what Apsalar's father had claimed. 'Then what,' he asked softly, 'is on the rest of them?'

'Well, they ain't consistent, if that's what you're wondering. There's breaks – other maps of other places, I guess. It's all jumbled, but I'd say the scale was the same on all of them.'

Fiddler slowly straightened. 'But that means ...' His voice trailed into silence, as he looked out upon this endless floor, stretching for leagues in every direction. Every *god in the* Abyss! *Are these all the realms? Every world – every place home* to *a House of the Azath? Queen of Dreams, what power is this?*

'Within the warren of the Azath,' Mappo said, his tone one of awe, 'you could go ... *anywhere.'*

'Are you sure of that?' Crokus asked. 'Here are the maps, yes, but –' he pointed down at the tile displaying the continent of Quon Tali – 'where's the gate? The way in?'

No-one spoke for a long moment, then Fiddler cleared his throat. 'You got an idea, lad?'

The Daru shrugged. 'Maps are maps – this one could be sitting on a tabletop, if you see my point.'

'So what do you suggest?'

'Ignore it. The only thing these tiles signify is that every House, in every place, is part of a pattern, a grand design. But even knowing that doesn't mean we can actually make sense of it. The Azath is beyond even the gods. We can end up getting lost in suppositions, in a mental game that takes us nowhere.'

'That's true enough,' the sapper grunted. 'And we're nowhere closer to figuring out which direction to walk in.'

'Perhaps Iskaral Pust has the right idea,' Apsalar said. Her boots grated on the tiles as she turned. 'Alas, he seems to have disappeared.'

Crokus spun around. 'Damn that bastard!'

The High Priest of Shadow, who had been ceaselessly circling them, was indeed nowhere to be seen. Fiddler grimaced. 'So he figured it out and didn't bother explaining before taking his leave—'

'Wait!' Mappo said. He set Icarium down, then took a dozen paces. 'Here,' he said. 'Hard to make out at first but now I see it clearly.'

The Trell seemed to be staring at something at his feet. 'What have you found?' Fiddler asked.

'Come closer – almost impossible to see otherwise, though that makes little sense ...'

The others approached.

A gaping hole yawned, a ragged gap where Iskaral Pust had simply fallen through and vanished. Fiddler knelt, edging closer to the hole. 'Hood's breath!' he groaned. The tiles were no more than an inch thick. Beneath them was not solid ground. Beneath them there was ... nothing.

'Is that the way out, do you think?' Mappo asked behind him.

The sapper edged back, the slick tiles suddenly feeling like the thinnest ice. 'Damned if I know, but I don't plan on jumping in and finding out.'

'I share your caution,' the Trell rumbled. He turned back to where Icarium lay and gathered his companion once again in his arms.

'That hole might spread,' Crokus said. 'I suggest we get moving. Any direction, just away from here.'

Apsalar hesitated. 'And Iskaral Pust? Perhaps he's lying unconscious on a ledge or something?'

'Not a chance,' Fiddler replied. 'From what I saw, the poor man's still falling. One look and every bone in me screamed *oblivion.* I think I'll trust my instincts on this one, lass.'

'A sad demise,' she said. 'I had grown almost fond of him.'

Fiddler nodded. 'Our very own pet scorpion, aye.'

Crokus took the lead as they moved away from the hole. Had they waited a few minutes longer, they would have seen a dull yellow mist rise from the gaping darkness, thickening until it was opaque. The mist remained for a time, then it began to dissipate, and when it finally vanished, so too had the hole – as if it had never been. The mosaic was complete once more.

Deadhouse. Malaz City, the heart of the Malazan *Empire. There is nothing for us there. More, an explanation that made sense would challenge even my experienced inventiveness. We must, I fear, take our leave.*

Somehow.

But this is far beyond me-this warren – and worse, my crimes are like wounds that refuse to close. I cannot escape my cowardice. In the end – and all here know it, though they do not speak of it – my selfish desires made a mockery of my integrity, my vows. I had a chance to see the threat ended, ended for ever.

How can friendship defeat such an opportunity? How can the comfort of familiarity rise up like a god, as if change itself had become something demonic? I am a coward – the offer of freedom, the sighing end to a lifetime's vow, proved the greatest terror of all.

And so, the simple truth . . . the tracks we have walked in for so long become our lives, in themselves a prison—

Apsalar leapt forward, her fingertips touching shoulder, then braids, then nothing. Her momentum took her forward, into the place where Mappo and Icarium had been a moment earlier. She fell towards a yawning darkness.

Crying out, Crokus grasped her ankles. He was pulled momentarily along the tiles towards the gaping hole before a fisherman's strong hands closed on him and anchored him down.

Together, the two men dragged Apsalar from the pit's edge. A dozen paces beyond it stood Fiddler – the Daru's cry had been the first intimation of trouble.

'They're gone!' Crokus shouted. 'They fell through – there was no warning, Fid! Nothing at all!'

The sapper softly cursed, lowering himself into an uneasy crouch. *We're intruders here* . . . He'd heard rumours of warrens that were airless, that were instant death to mortals who dared enter them. There was an arrogance in assuming that every realm in existence bowed to human needs. *Intruders – this place cares nothing for us, nor are there any laws demanding that it accommodate us.*

Mind you, the same could be said for any world.

He hissed, slowly straightened, fighting against the sudden welling of grief at the loss of two men he had come to consider friends. And *which of us is next?* 'To me,' he growled. 'All three of you – carefully.' He unslung his pack, set it down and rummaged inside until he found a coiled length of rope. 'We're tying ourselves together – if one goes, either we save him or her, or we all go. Agreed?'

Relieved nods answered him.

Aye, the thought of wandering alone in this warren is not a pleasant one.

They quickly attached the rope between them.

The four travellers had walked another thousand paces when the air stirred – the first wind they had felt since entering the warren – and they ducked as one beneath the passage of something enormous directly overhead.

Scrabbling for his crossbow, Fiddler twisted around to look skyward. 'Hood's breath!'

But the three dragons were already past, ignoring the humans entirely. They flew in triangular formation like a flight of geese, and were of a kind, ochre-scaled, their wing-spans as far across as five wagons end to end. Long, sinuous tails stretched back behind them.

'Foolish to think,' Apsalar muttered, 'that we're the only ones to make use of this realm.'

Crokus grunted. 'I've seen bigger ...'

A faint grin cracked Fiddler's features. 'Aye, lad, I know you have.'

The dragons were almost at the edge of their vision when they banked as one, plunged down towards the ground and broke through the tiles, vanishing from sight.

No-one spoke for a long minute, then Apsalar's father cleared his throat and said, 'I think that just told us something.'

The sapper nodded. 'Aye.' *You go through when you get to where you're going – even if you don't exactly plan on it.* He thought back to Mappo and Icarium. The Trell would have had no reason to accompany them all the way to Malaz City. After all, Mappo had a friend to heal, to coax back to consciousness. He'd be looking for a safe place to do that. As for Iskaral Pust... *Probably at the cliffs foot right now, screaming up at the bhok'arala for a rope . . .*

'All right,' Fiddler said, straightening. 'Seems we've just got to keep moving .. . until the time and place arrives.'

'Mappo and Icarium are not lost, not dead,' Crokus said in obvious relief as they began walking again.

'Nor is the High Priest,' Apsalar added.

'Well,' the Daru muttered, 'I suppose we have to take the bad with the good.'

Fiddler briefly wondered about those three dragons – where they had gone, what tasks awaited them – then he shrugged. Their appearance, their departure and, in between and most importantly, their *indifference* to the four mortals below was a sobering reminder that the world was far bigger than that defined by their own lives, their own desires and goals. The seemingly headlong plunge this journey had become was in truth but the smallest succession of steps, of no greater import than the struggles of a termite.

The worlds live on, beyond us, countless unravelling tales.

In his mind's eye he saw his horizons stretch out on all sides, and as they grew ever vaster he in turn saw himself as ever smaller, ever more insignificant.

We are all lone souls. It pays to know humility, lest the delusion of control, of mastery, overwhelms. And indeed, we seem a species prone to that delusion, again and ever again . . .

Korbolo Dom's warriors celebrated their triumph through the hours of darkness after the Fall of Coltaine. The sounds of that revelry drifted over Aren's walls and brought a coldness to the air that had little to do with the physical reality of the sultry night.

Within the city, facing the north gates, was a broad concourse, generally used as a caravan staging area. This open space was now packed with

refugees. The task of billeting would have to await the more pressing needs of food, water and medical attention.

Commander Blistig had set his garrison to those efforts, and his soldiers worked tirelessly, displaying extraordinary compassion, as if answering their own need to respond to the enemy's triumph beyond the walls. Coltaine, his Wickans and the Seventh had given their lives for those the guard now tended. Solicitude was fast becoming an overwhelming gesture.

Yet other tensions rode the air.

The final sacrifice was unnecessary. We could have saved them, if not for the coward commanding us. Two powerful honours had clashed – the raw duty to save the lives of fellow soldiers, and the discipline of the Malazan command structure – and from that collision ten thousand living, breathing, highly trained soldiers now stood broken.

Down in the concourse, Duiker wandered aimlessly through the crowds. Figures loomed before him every now and then, blurred faces murmuring meaningless words, offering information that they each believed – hoped – would soothe him. The Wickan youths had claimed Nil and Nether and now protected them with a fierceness that none dared challenge. Countless refugees had been retrieved from the very edge of Hood's Gates, each one a source of savage defiance – a pleasure revealed in glittering eyes and bared teeth. Those few for whom the final flight – and perhaps the release of salvation itself – had proved too much for their broken, riven flesh, were fought for in unyielding desperation. Hood had to reach for those failing souls, reach for, grasp and drag them into oblivion, with the healers employing every skill they possessed to defeat the effort.

Duiker had found his own oblivion deep inside himself, and he had no desire to leave its numbing comfort. Within that place, pain could do naught but gnaw at the very edges, and those edges seemed to be growing ever more distant.

Words occasionally seeped through, as various officers and soldiers delivered details of things they clearly felt the historian should know. The

caution in their voices was not necessary, for the information was absorbed stripped of feeling. Duiker was beyond hurting.

The *Silanda*, with its load of wounded soldiers, had not arrived, he learned from a Wickan youth named Temul. Adjunct Tavore's fleet was less than a week away. Korbolo Dom was likely to begin a siege, for Sha'ik was on her way from Raraku, leading an army twice the size of the renegade Fist's own force. Mallick Rel had led High Fist Pormqual back to the palace. A plan was now in the air, a plan to reap vengeance, and it was but hours away—

Blinking, Duiker tried to focus on the face before him, the face telling him this news in an urgent tone. But the first brush of recognition sent the historian reeling back in his mind. Too much pain was embedded in the memories that were so closely chained to that recognition. He stepped back.

The figure reached out a strong hand that closed on Duiker's ragged shirt and pulled the historian closer once again. The bearded mouth was moving, shaping words, demanding, angry words.

'—through to you, Historian! It's the assumptions, don't you see? Our only reports have come from that nobleman, Nethpara. But we need a soldier's assessment – do you understand? Damn you, it's almost dawn!'

'What? What are you talking about?'

Blistig's face twisted. 'Mallick Rel has got through to Pormqual. Hood knows how, but he has! We're going to strike Korbolo's army – in less than an hour's time, when they're still drunk, still exhausted. We're marching out, Duiker! Do you understand me?'

Cruel. . . so cruel—

'How many are out there? We need reliable estimates—'

'Thousands. Tens of thousands. Hundreds—'

'Think, damn you! If we can knock these bastards out ... before Sha'ik arrives—'

'I don't know, Blistig! That army grew with every Hood-cursed league!'

'Nethpara judges just under ten thousand—'

'The man's a fool.'

'He's also laying the deaths of thousands of innocent refugees at Coltaine's feet—'

'W— What?' The historian staggered, and if not for Blistig's grip would have fallen.

'Don't you see? Without you, Duiker, that version of what happened out there will win the day. It's already spread through the ranks and it's damned troubling. Certainty's crumbling – the desire for vengeance is weakening—'

It was enough. The historian felt a jolt. Eyes widening, he straightened. 'Where is he? Nethpara! Where—'

'He's been in with Pormqual and Mallick Rel for the past two bells.'

'Take me there.'

A succession of horns echoed behind them, the call for assembly. Duiker's gaze swept past the commander to the ranks contracting into formation. He stared skyward, saw the stars dimming in a lightening sky.

'Fener's tusk,' Blistig growled. 'It might be too late—'

'Take me to Pormqual – to Mallick Rel—'

'Follow me, then.'

The refugees were stirring as garrison soldiers moved among them, beginning the task of clearing the concourse to allow room for the High Fist's army.

Blistig pushed through the crowd, Duiker a step behind him. 'Pormqual's ordered my garrison out with them,' the commander said over his shoulder. 'Rearguard. That's in defiance of my responsibility. My task is to defend this city, yet the High Fist has been conscripting from my own soldiers, bleeding the companies. I'm down to three hundred now, barely enough to hold the walls. Especially with all the Red Blades under arrest—'

'Under arrest! Why?'

'Seven Cities blood – Pormqual doesn't trust them.'

'The fool! They're the most loyal soldiers of the Empire I've ever known —'

'I agree, Historian, but my opinion is worthless—'

'Mine had better not be,' Duiker said.

Blistig paused, turning. 'Do you support the High Fist's decision to attack?'

'Hood, no!'

'Why?'

'Because we don't know how many are out there. Wiser to wait for Tavore, wiser still to let Korbolo fling his warriors against these walls—'

Blistig nodded. 'We'd cut them to pieces. The question is, can you convince Pormqual of all you've just said?'

'You know him,' Duiker retorted. 'I don't.'

The commander grimaced. 'Let's go.'

The standards of the High Fist's army flanked a knot of mounted figures near the mouth of the main avenue leading off from the concourse. Blistig led the historian directly for them.

Duiker saw Pormqual seated atop a magnificent warhorse. The High Fist's armour was ornate, more decorative than functional. The jewelled hilt of a Grisian broadsword jutted from one hip; the helm bore a gold-threaded sunburst on the polished iron skullcap. His face looked sickly and bloodless.

Mallick Rel sat on a white horse beside the High Fist, silk-cloaked and weaponless, a sea-blue cloth wrapped about his head. Various officers, both mounted and on foot, surrounded them, and among that group Duiker saw Nethpara and Pullyk Alar.

A red mist descended on the scene as Duiker's stare fixed on the two noblemen. Increasing his pace, he pushed past Blistig, who snapped a hand out to drag the historian back.

'Leave that till later, man. You've got a more immediate responsibility to deal with first.'

Trembling, Duiker forced his rage back. He managed a nod.

'Come on, the High Fist has seen us.'

Pormqual's expression was cold as he looked down on Duiker. His voice was shrill as he said, 'Historian, your arrival is timely. We have two tasks before us this day, both of which require your presence—'

'High Fist—'

'Silence! Interrupt me again and I'll have your tongue cut out!' He paused, settled, then resumed his statement. 'First of all, you shall yourself accompany us in the battle to come. To witness the proper means of dealing with that rabble. The selling of the lives of innocent refugees is not a bargain I shall make – there shall be no repetition of earlier tragedies, earlier crimes of treason! The fools out there have only now settled to sleep – and they shall pay for that stupidity, I assure you.

'Then, when the renegades have been slaughtered, we shall attend to other responsibilities, primarily your arrest and that of the warlocks known as Nil and Nether – the last remaining "officers" of Coltaine's horrific command. And I assure you, the punishment following your conviction shall match the severity of your crimes.' He gestured and an aide led Duiker's mare forward. 'Alas, your beast is hardly fit for the company, but it shall suffice.

'Commander Blistig, prepare your soldiers for marching. We wish our rearguard to be no more and no less than three hundred paces behind us. I trust that is within your capabilities – if not, inform me now, and I shall happily place someone else in command of the garrison.'

'Aye, High Fist, the task is within my capabilities.'

Duiker's gaze swung to Mallick Rel, and the historian wondered at the satisfied flush in the priest's face, but only for a moment. Ah, *of course, past slights. Not a man to cross, are you, Rel?*

In silence, the historian walked to his horse and climbed into the saddle. He laid a hand on the mare's thin, ungroomed neck, then gathered the reins.

The lead companies of medium cavalry were assembled at the gate. Once out of the city, little time would be wasted, as the horsewarriors would immediately part in a sweeping manoeuvre intended to surround Korbolo's encampment, while the infantry poured out from the gate to assemble into solid phalanxes before marching on the enemy position.

Blistig had departed the scene without a backward glance. Duiker stared at the distant gate, scanned the troops gathered there.

'Historian.'

He turned his head, looked down at Nethpara.

The nobleman was smiling. 'You should have treated me with more respect. I suppose you see that now, although it's come too late for you.'

Nethpara did not notice Duiker slip his boot from the stirrup.

'For the insults you have committed upon my person ... for the laying of hands on me, Historian, you shall suffer—'

'No doubt,' Duiker cut in. 'And here's one last insult.' He kicked out, the toe of his boot driving into the nobleman's flabby throat, then up. Trachea crumpled inward, head snapped back with a crunching, popping sound, Nethpara pitched backward, thumped heavily on the cobblestones. His eyes stared up unseeing at the pale sky.

Pullyk Alar shrieked.

Soldiers closed in around the historian, weapons out.

'By all means,' Duiker said, 'I shall welcome an end to this—'

'You shall not be so fortunate!' Pormqual hissed, white with rage.

Duiker sneered at the man. 'You've already convicted me as an executioner. What's one more, you craven pile of dung?' He shifted his gaze to Mallick Rel. 'And as for you, Jhistal, come closer – my life's still incomplete.'

The historian did not notice – nor did anyone else – the arrival of a captain of Blistig's garrison. The man had been about to speak with Duiker, to inform him of the safe delivery of a child to a grandfather. But at the word 'Jhistal' he stiffened, then, eyes widening, he took a step back.

The gates opened just then, and the troops of cavalry poured through. Motion rippled through the legions of infantry as weapons were readied.

Keneb took another step back, that lone word echoing in his mind. He knew it from somewhere, but full awareness eluded him, even as alarms rang in his mind. A voice within was shouting that he needed to find Blistig – he did not yet know why, but it was imperative—

But he had run out of time.

Keneb stared out as the army surged towards the gate. The orders had been given, and the momentum was unstoppable.

The captain took another step back, his words to Duiker forgotten. He stumbled over Nethpara's body unnoticing, then spun about. And ran.

Sixty paces on, Keneb's mind was suddenly flooded with the memory of when he had last heard the word 'Jhistal'.

Duiker rode with the mounted officers out onto the plain.

Korbolo Dom's army looked to be in full panicked flight, though the historian noted that they still held on to their weapons even as they fled back over the mound and its facing slope. The High Fist's cavalry rode hard to either side, quickly outpacing the footsoldiers as they pushed to complete the encirclement. Both wings rode beyond line of sight, into the evenly distributed hills of the burial ground.

The High Fist's legions moved at double time, silent and determined. They had no hope of catching the fleeing army until the cavalry had completed the encirclement, closing off all avenues of escape.

'As you predicted, High Fist!' Mallick Rel shouted to Pormqual as they cantered along. 'They are routed!'

'But they shall not escape, shall they?' Pormqual laughed, pitching unevenly in his saddle.

Gods below, the High Fist can't even ride.

The pursuit took them up and over the first barrow, and they rode among the corpses of the Seventh and the Wickans. Those looted bodies spread northward in a wide swath, mapping the route of Coltaine's running battle, over the next barrow, then around the base of the one beyond. Duiker struggled to keep from scanning those corpses, seeking familiar faces in their unfamiliar expressions of death. He stared forward, studying the fleeing renegades.

Pormqual periodically slowed their pace to keep within the midst of the infantry. The wings of cavalry were somewhere ahead, and had not reappeared. In the meantime, the thousands of fleeing soldiers stayed ahead of the phalanxes, sweeping around the barrows, leaving booty behind as they went.

The High Fist and his army doggedly pursued, down into a vast basin, packed with the routed enemy who began pouring up the gently sloping sides. Dust ringed the crest to the east and west, and directly ahead.

'The encirclement is complete!' Pormqual cried. 'See the dust!'

Duiker frowned at that dust. Faintly, he heard the sounds of battle. A moment later those sounds began to diminish, while the rising dust thickened, deepened.

The infantry marched down into the basin.

Something's wrong . . .

The fleeing soldiers had reached the crests now on all sides but the south, but instead of continuing their panicked pace, they slowed, readied their weapons and turned about.

The curtain of dust climbed higher behind those warriors, then mounted figures appeared – not Pormqual's cavalry, but tribal riders. A moment later the ring of footsoldiers thickened, as rank after rank joined them.

Duiker spun in his saddle. Seven Cities cavalry lined the south skylines, closing the back door.

And *so we ride into the simplest of traps. Leaving Aren defenceless . . .*

'Mallick!' Pormqual shrieked, reining in. 'What is happening! What has happened?'

The priest's head was jerking in all directions, his jaw dropping. 'Treachery!' he hissed. He swung his white horse around, eyes fixing on Duiker. 'This is your doing, Historian! Part of the bargain Nethpara hinted at! More, I see the sorcery around you now – you have been communicating with Korbolo Dom! Gods, we were fools!'

Duiker ignored the man, his eyes squinting as he studied the scene to the south, and the tag-end elements of Pormqual's army as they wheeled about to face the threat now behind them. Clearly, the High Fist's cavalry wings had been annihilated.

'We are surrounded! They are in the tens of thousands! We shall be slaughtered!' The High Fist jabbed a finger at the historian. 'Kill him! Kill him now!'

'Wait!' Mallick Rel shouted. He turned to Pormqual. 'Please, High Fist, leave that to me, I beg you! Be assured that I shall exact a worthy punishment!'

'As you say, then, but—' Pormqual glared about. 'What shall we do, Mallick?'

The priest pointed to the north. 'There, riders approach under a white flag – let us see what Korbolo Dom proposes, High Fist! What have we to lose?'

'I cannot speak with them!' Pormqual gibbered. 'I cannot think! Mallick – please!'

'Very well,' the Jhistal priest acceded. He swung his mount around, jabbed spurred heels into the beast's flanks and rode through the milling ranks of the High Fist's trapped army.

Midway up the distant north slope, the converging riders met. The parley lasted less than a minute, then Mallick wheeled and rode back.

'If we push back we can break the elements to the south,' Duiker quietly said to the High Fist. 'A fighting withdrawal back to the city's gates—'

'Not another word from you, traitor!'

Mallick Rel arrived, his expression filled with hope. 'Korbolo Dom has had enough of bloodshed, High Fist! Yesterday's slaughter has left him sickened!'

'What does he propose, then?' Pormqual demanded, leaning forward.

'Our only hope, High Fist. You must command your army to lay down its arms – to pass them out to the edges, then withdraw into a compact mass in the centre of this basin. They shall be prisoners of war, and therefore treated with mercy. As for you and me, we shall be made hostages. When Tavore arrives, arrangements will be made for our honourable return. High Fist, we have no choice in the matter ...'

A strange lassitude seeped into Duiker as he listened. He knew he could say nothing to sway the High Fist. He slowly dismounted, reached under his mare and unhitched the girth.

'What are you doing, traitor?' Mallick Rel demanded.

'I'm freeing my horse,' the historian said reasonably. 'The enemy won't bother with her – too worn out to be of any use. She'll head back to Aren – it's the least I can do for her.' He removed the saddle, dropped it to the ground to one side, then pulled the bit from the mare's mouth.

The priest stared for a moment longer, a slight frown on his face, then he turned back to the High Fist. 'They await our reply.'

Duiker stepped close to his horse's head and laid a hand on the soft muzzle. 'Take care,' he whispered. Then he stepped back, gave the animal a slap on the rump. The mare sprang away, wheeled, then trotted southward – as Duiker knew she would.

'What choice?' Pormqual whispered. 'Unlike Coltaine, I must consider my soldiers . .. their lives are worth everything . .. peace will return to this land, sooner or later ...'

'Thousands of husbands, wives, and fathers and mothers will bless your name, High Fist. To fight now, to seek out that bitter, pointless end, ah, they will curse your name for all eternity.'

'I cannot have that,' Pormqual agreed. He faced his officers. 'Lay down arms. Deliver the orders – all weapons to go to the edges and left there, the ranks to withdraw to the centre of the basin.'

Duiker stared at the four captains who listened in silence to the High Fist's commands. A long moment passed, then the officers saluted and rode off.

Duiker turned away.

The disarmament took close to an hour, the Malazan soldiers yielding their weapons in silence. Those weapons were piled on the ground just beyond the phalanxes, then the soldiers made their way inward, forming up in tight, restless ranks in the basin's centre.

Tribal horsewarriors then rode down and collected the arms. Twenty minutes later an army of ten thousand Malazans crowded the basin, weaponless, helpless.

Korbolo Dom's vanguard detached from the forces on the north ridge and rode down towards the High Fist's position.

Duiker stared at the approaching group. He saw Kamist Reloe, a handful of war chiefs, two unarmed women who were in all likelihood mages, and Korbolo Dom himself, a squat half-Napan, all hair shaved from his body,

revealing scars in tangled webs. He was smiling as he reined in with his companions before the High Fist, Mallick Rel and the other officers.

'Well done,' he growled, his eyes on the priest.

The Jhistal dismounted, stepped forward and bowed. 'I deliver to you High Fist Pormqual and his ten thousand. More, I deliver to you the city Aren, in Sha'ik's name—'

'Wrong,' Duiker chuckled.

Mallick Rel faced him.

'You've not delivered Aren, Jhistal.'

'What claims do you make now, old man?'

'I'm surprised you didn't notice,' the historian said. 'Too busy gloating, I guess. Take a close look at the companies around you, especially those to the south ...'

Mallick's eyes narrowed as he scanned the gathered legions. Then he paled. 'Blistig!'

'Seems the commander and his garrison decided to stay behind after all. Granted, they're only two or three hundred, but we both know that that will be enough – for the week or so until Tavore arrives. Aren's walls are high, well impregnated these days with Otataral, I believe – proof against any sorcery. Thinking on it, I would predict that there are Red Blades lining those walls now, as well as the garrison. You have failed in your betrayal, Jhistal. Failed.'

The priest jerked forward, the back of his hand cracking against Duiker's face. The historian was spun around by the savage blow, and the rings on the man's hand raking through the flesh of one cheek burst the barely healed splits in his lips and chin. He fell hard to the ground and felt something shatter against his sternum.

He pushed himself up, the blood streaming down his lacerated face. Looking down at the ground beneath him, he expected to see tiny fragments

of broken glass, but there were none. The leather thong around his neck now had nothing on it at all.

Hands pulled him roughly to his feet and dragged him around to face Mallick Rel once more.

The priest was trembling still. 'Your death shall be—'

'Silence!' Korbolo snapped. He eyed Duiker. 'You are the historian who rode with Coltaine.'

The historian faced him. 'I am.'

'You are a soldier.'

'As you say.'

'I do, and so you shall die with these soldiers, in a manner no different—'

'You mean to slaughter ten thousand unarmed men and women, Korbolo Dom?'

'I mean to cripple Tavore before she even sets foot on this continent. I mean to make her too furious to think. I mean to crack that façade so she dreams of vengeance day and night, poisoning her every decision.'

'You always fashioned yourself as the Empire's harshest Fist, didn't you, Korbolo Dom? As if cruelty's a virtue ...'

The pale-blue-skinned commander simply shrugged. 'Best join the others now, Duiker – a soldier of Coltaine's army deserves that much.' Korbolo then turned to Mallick. 'My mercy, however, does not extend to that one soldier whose arrow stole Coltaine from our pleasure. Where is he, Priest?'

'He went missing, alas. Last seen an hour after the deed – Blistig had his soldiers search everywhere, without success. Even if he has now found him, he is with the garrison, afraid to say.'

The renegade Fist scowled. 'There have been disappointments this day, Mallick Rel.'

'Korbolo Dom, sir!' Pormqual said, still bearing an expression of disbelief. 'I do not understand—'

'Clearly you do not,' the commander agreed, his face twisting in disgust. 'Jhistal, have you any particular fate in mind for this fool?'

'None. He is yours.'

'I cannot grant him the dignified sacrifice I have in mind for his soldiers. That would leave too bitter a taste in my mouth, I'm afraid.' Korbolo Dom hesitated, then sighed and made a slight gesture with one hand.

A war chief's tulwar flashed behind the High Fist, lifted the man's head clean from his shoulders and sent it spinning. The warhorse bolted in alarm and broke through the ring of soldiers. The beautiful beast galloped down among the unarmed soldiers, carrying its headless burden into their midst. The High Fist's corpse, Duiker saw, rode in the saddle with a grace not matched in life, weaving this way and that before hands reached up to slow the frightened horse, and Pormqual's body slid to one side, falling into waiting arms.

It may have been his imagination, but Duiker thought he could hear the harsh laughter of a god.

There was no shortage of spikes, yet it took a day and a half before the last screaming prisoner was nailed to the last crowded cedar lining Aren Way.

Ten thousand dead and dying Malazans stared down on that wide, exquisitely engineered Imperial road – eyes unseeing or eyes uncomprehending – it made little difference.

Duiker was the last, the rusty iron spikes driven through his wrists and upper arms to hold him in place high on the tree's blood-streaked bole. More spikes were hammered through his ankles and the muscles of his outer thighs.

The pain was unlike anything the historian had ever known before. Yet even worse was the knowledge that that pain would accompany his entire

final journey down into eventual unconsciousness, and with it – an added trauma – were the images burned into him: almost forty hours of being driven on foot up Aren Way, watching each and every one of those ten thousand soldiers joined to the mass crucifixion in a chain of suffering stretching over three leagues, each link scores of men and women nailed to every tree, to every available space on those tall, broad trunks.

The historian was well beyond shock when his turn finally came, as the last soldier to close the human chain, and he was dragged to the tree, up the scaffolding, pushed against the ridged bark, arms forced outward, feeling the cold bite of the iron spikes pressed against his skin, and then, when the mallets swung, the explosion of pain that loosed his bowels, leaving him stained and writhing. The greatest pain arrived when the scaffolding dropped from under him, and his full weight fell onto the pinning spikes. Until that moment, he had truly believed he had gone as far into agony as was humanly possible.

He was wrong.

After what seemed like an eternity when the ceaseless shrieking of his sundered flesh had drowned out all else within him, a cool, calm clarity emerged, and thoughts, scattered and wandering, rose into his fading awareness.

The Jaghut ghost . . . why do I think of him now? Of that eternity of grief? What is he to me? What is anyone or anything to *me, now? I await Hood's Gate at last – the time for memories, for regrets and comprehensions is past. You must see that now, old*

man. Your nameless marine awaits you, and Bult and Corporal List, and Lull and Sulwar and Mincer. Kulp and Heboric, too, most likely. You leave a place of strangers now, and go to a place of companions, of friends.

So claim the priests of Hood.

It's the last gift. I am done with this world, for I am alone in it. Alone.

A ghostly, tusked face rose before his mind's eye, and though he had never before seen it, he knew that the Jaghut had found him. The gravest

compassion filled that creature's unhuman eyes, a compassion that Duiker could not understand.

Why grieve, Jaghut? I shall not haunt eternity as you have done. I shall not return to this place, nor suffer again the losses a mortal suffers in life, and in living. Hood is about to bless me, Jaghut – no need to grieve . . .

Those thoughts echoed only a moment longer, as the Jaghut's ravaged face faded and darkness closed in around the historian, closed in until it swallowed him.

And with it, awareness ceased.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Laseen sent Tavore
Rushing across the seas
to clasp Coltaine's hand
And closing her fingers
She held crow-picked bones.

The Sha'ik Uprising
Wu

Kalam threw himself into the shadows at the base of a low, battered wall, then dragged the still-warm corpse half over him. He ducked his head down, then lay still, battling to slow his breathing.

A few moments later, light footfalls sounded on the street's cobbles. A voice hissed an angry halt.

'They pursued,' another hunter whispered. 'And he ambushed them – here. Gods! What kind of man is he?'

A third Claw spoke, a woman. 'He can't be far away—'

'Of course he's close,' snapped the leader who had first called the halt. 'He doesn't have wings, does he? He's not immortal, he's not immune to the charms of our blades – no more such mutterings, do you two hear me? Now spread out – you, up that side, and you, up the other.' Sorcery cast its cold breath. 'I'll stay in the middle,' the leader said.

Aye, and unseen, meaning you're first, bastard.

Kalam listened as the other two headed off. He knew the pattern they would assume, the two flankers moving ahead, the leader – hidden in sorcery – hanging back, eyes flicking between the two hunters, scanning alley mouths, rooftops, a rib-less crossbow in each hand. Kalam waited a

moment longer, then slowly, silently slipped free of the corpse and rose into a crouch.

He padded into the street, his bare feet making no sound. To someone who knew what to look for, the bloom of darkness edging forward twenty paces ahead was just discernible. Not an easy spell to maintain, it was inevitably weaker to the rear, and Kalam could make out a hint of the figure moving within it.

He closed the distance like a charging leopard. One of Kalam's elbows connected with the base of the leader's skull, killing him instantly. He caught one of the crossbows before it struck the cobbles, but the other eluded him, clattering and skittering on the street. Silently cursing, the assassin continued his charge, angling right, towards an alley mouth twenty paces behind the flanker on that side.

He dived at the muted snap of a crossbow and felt the quarrel rip through his cloak. Then he was rolling into the alley's narrow confines, sliding on rotted vegetables. Rats scattered from his path as he regained his feet and darted into deeper shadows.

An alcove loomed on his left and he spun, backed into its gloom and pulled free his own crossbow. Doubly armed, he waited.

A figure edged into view and paused opposite him, no more than six feet away.

The woman ducked and twisted even as Kalam fired – and the assassin knew he had missed. Her dagger, however, did not. The blade, flashing out from her hand, thudded as it struck him just beneath his right clavicle. A second thrown weapon – an iron star – embedded itself in the alcove's wooden door beside Kalam's face.

He pressed the release on the second crossbow. The quarrel took her low in the belly. She tumbled back and was dead of the White Paralt before she stopped moving.

Kalam was not – the weapon jutting from his chest must be clean. He sank down, laying the two crossbows on the ground, then reached up and

withdrew the knife, reversing grip.

He'd already used up his other weapons, although he still retained the tongs and the small sack of cloth-tacks.

The last hunter was close, waiting for Kalam to make another break – and the man knew precisely where he hid. The body lying opposite was the clearest indication of that.

Now what?

The right-hand side of his shirt was wet and sticky, and he could feel the heat of the blood streaming down his body on that side. It was his third minor wound of the night – a throwing star had found his back during the next-to-last skirmish. Such weapons were never poisoned – too risky for the thrower, even when gloved. The heavy apron had absorbed most of the impact, and he'd scraped the star off against a wall.

His mental discipline in slowing the flow of blood from the various wounds was close to tatters. He was weakening. Fast.

Kalam looked straight up. The underside of a wooden balcony was directly overhead, the two paint-chipped braces about seven and a half feet above the ground. A jump might allow him to reach one, but that would be a noisy affair, and success would leave him helpless.

He drew the tongs from their loop. Gripping the bloody knife in his teeth, he slowly straightened, reaching up with the tongs. They closed over the brace.

Now, will the damned thing hold my weight?

Gripping the handles hard, he cautiously tensed his shoulders, drew himself up an inch, then another. The brace did not so much as groan – and he realized that the wooden beam in all likelihood extended into a deep socket in the stone wall itself. He continued pulling himself upward.

The challenge was maintaining silence, for any rustle or whisper of noise would alert his hunter. Arms and shoulders trembling, Kalam drew his legs

up, a fraction at a time, tucked his right leg even higher, then edged it, foot first, through the triangular gap above the brace.

He hooked that leg, pulled, and was finally able to ease the strain on his arms and shoulders.

Kalam hung there, motionless, for a long minute.

Claws liked waiting games. They excelled in contests of patience. His hunter had evidently concluded that this was one of those games, and he intended to win it.

Well, stranger, I don't play by your rules.

He slipped the tongs free, held them out and lifted them towards the balcony's floor. This was the greatest risk, since he had no idea what occupied that floor above him. He probed with the tongs in minute increments until he could reach no farther, then he lowered the tool down and left it there.

The knife stayed clenched between his teeth, filling his mouth with the taste of his own blood. With both hands freed, Kalam gripped the balcony's ledge, slowly pulled his weight away from the brace and drew himself up. Hands climbing the railings, he swung a leg over and, a moment later, crouched on the balcony floor, the tongs at his feet.

He scanned the area. Clay pots housing various herbs, a moulded bread oven on a foundation of bricks occupying one end, the heat radiating from it reaching the assassin's sweat-cooled face.

A barred hatch that a person would have to crawl to get through offered the only way into the room beyond.

His scan ended upon meeting the eyes of a small dog crouched at the end opposite the bread oven. Black-haired, compactly muscled and with a foxlike snout and ears, the creature was chewing on half a rat, and as it chewed it watched Kalam's every move with those sharp, black eyes.

Kalam released a very soft sigh. *Another dubious claim to fame for Malaz City: the Mahzan ratter, bred for its fearless insanity.* There was no

predicting what the dog would do once it had decided its meal was done. It might lick his hand. It might bite his nose off.

He watched it sniff at the mangled meat between its paws, then gobble it up, chewing overlong as it considered Kalam. Then it ate the rat's tail, choking briefly – the sound barely a whisper – before managing to swallow its length.

The ratter licked its forepaws, rose into a sitting position, ducked its head to lick elsewhere, then stood facing the bleeding assassin.

The barking exploded in the night air, a frenzy that had the ratter bouncing around with the effort.

Kalam leapt up onto the balcony rail. A blur of motion darted beneath him, down in the alley. He plunged straight for it, the throwing knife in his left hand.

Even as he dropped through the air, he was sure he was finished. His lone hunter had found allies – another entire Hand.

Sorcery flared upward to strike Kalam like a massive fist. The knife flew from nerveless fingers. Twisting, his trajectory knocked awry by the mage's attack, he missed his target and struck the cobbles hard on his left side.

The maniacal barking overhead continued unabated.

Kalam's intended target charged him, blades flashing. He drew his legs up and kicked out, but the man slipped past with a deft motion. The knife blade scored against Kalam's ribs on either side. The hunter's forehead cracked against his nose. Light exploded behind the assassin's eyes.

A moment later, as the hunter reared back, straddling Kalam, and raised both knives, a snarling black bundle landed on the man's head. He shrieked as razorlike, overlong canines ripped open one side of his face.

Kalam caught one wrist, snapped it and pulled the knife from the spasming hand.

The hunter was desperately stabbing at the ratter with the other knife, without much luck, then he threw the weapon away and reached for the

writhing dog.

Kalam sank his knife into the hunter's heart.

Pushing the body aside, he staggered upright – to find himself surrounded.

'You can call your dog off, Kalam,' a woman said.

He glanced down at the animal – it hadn't slowed. Blood spattered the cobbles around the corpse's head and neck.

'Alas,' Kalam growled. 'Not mine ... though I wish I had a hundred of the beasts.' The pain of his shattered nose throbbed. Tears streamed from his eyes, joining the flow of blood dripping from his lips and chin.

'Oh, for Hood's sake!' The woman turned to one of her hunters. 'Kill the damned thing—'

'Not necessary,' Kalam said, stepping over. He reached down, grabbed the creature by its scruff and lobbed it back towards the balcony. The ratter yelped, just clearing the rail, then vanished from sight. A wild skitter of claws announced its landing.

A wavering voice reached down from the balcony's hatch. 'Flower, darling, settle down now, there's a good boy.'

Kalam eyed the leader. 'All right, then,' he said. 'Finish it.'

'With pleasure—'

The quarrel's impact threw her into Kalam's arms, almost skewering him on the great barbed point jutting from her chest. The four remaining hunters dived for cover, not knowing what had arrived, as horse hooves crashed in the alley.

Kalam gaped to see his stallion charging for him and, crouched low over the saddle and swinging back the clawfoot on the Marine-issue crossbow, Minala.

The assassin stepped aside a split second before being trampled, grasped an edge of the saddle and let the animal's momentum swing him up behind

Minala. She thrust the crossbow into his hands. 'Cover us!'

Twisting, he saw four shapes in pursuit. Kalam fired. The hunters pitched down to the ground as one. The quarrel careened off a wall and skittered away into the darkness.

The alley opened onto a street. Minala wheeled the stallion to the left. Hooves skidded, spraying sparks. Righting itself, the horse bolted forward.

Malaz City's harbour district was a tangle of narrow, twisting streets and alleys, seemingly impossible for a horse at full gallop, in the dead of night. The next few minutes marked the wildest ride Kalam had ever known. Minala's skill was breathtaking.

After a short while, Kalam leaned close to her. 'Where in Hood's name are you taking us? The whole city's crawling with Claws, woman—'

'I know, damn you!'

She guided the stallion across a wooden bridge. Looking up, the assassin saw the upper district and, beyond it, a looming black shape: the cliff- and Mock's Hold.

'Minala!'

'You wanted the Empress, right? Well, you bastard, she's right there – in Mock's Hold!'

Oh, Hood's shadow!

The tiles gave way without a sound. Cold blackness swallowed the four travellers.

The drop ended abruptly, in a bone-jarring impact with smooth, polished flagstones.

Groaning, Fiddler sat up, the sack of munitions still strapped to his shoulders. He'd injured his barely healed ankle in the fall and the pain was excruciating. Teeth clenched, he looked around. The others were all in one piece, it seemed, slowly clambering to their feet.

They were in a round room, a perfect match to the one they had left in Tremorlor. For a moment, the sapper feared they had simply returned there, but then he smelled salt in the air.

'We're here,' he said. 'Deadhouse.'

'What makes you so sure?' Crokus demanded.

Fiddler crawled over to a wall and levered himself upright. He tested the leg, winced. 'I smell Malaz Bay – and feel how damp the air is. This ain't Tremorlor, lad.'

'But we might be in any House, in any place beside a bay—'

'We might,' the sapper conceded.

'It's simply a matter of finding out,' Apsalar said reasonably. 'You've hurt your ankle again, Fiddler.'

'Aye. I wish Mappo was here with his elixirs...'

'Can you walk?' Crokus asked.

'Not much choice.'

Apsalar's father approached the stair, looked down. 'Someone's home,' he said. 'I see lantern light.'

'Oh, that's just wonderful,' Crokus muttered, unsheathing his knives.

'Put 'em away,' Fiddler said. 'Either we're guests or we're dead. Let's go introduce ourselves, shall we?'

Descending to the main floor – with Fiddler leaning hard on the Daru – they passed through an open door into the hallway. Lanterns glowed in niches along its length, and the flicker of firelight issued from the open double doors opposite the entranceway.

As at Tremorlor, a massive suit of armour filled an alcove halfway down the hall's length, and this one had seen serious battle.

The group paused to regard it briefly, in silence, before continuing on to the opened doors.

Apsalar leading, they entered the main chamber. The flames in the stone fireplace seemed to be burning without fuel, and a strange blackness around its edges revealed it as a small portal, opened onto a warren of ceaseless fire.

A figure, its back to them, stood staring into those flames. Dressed in faded ochre robes, the man was solid, broad-shouldered and at least seven feet tall. A long, iron-hued ponytail swept down between his shoulders, bound just above the small of his back with a dull length of chain.

Without turning, the guardian spoke in a low, rumbling voice. 'Your failure in taking Icarium has been noted.'

Fiddler grunted. 'In the end, it was not up to us. Mappo—'

'Oh yes, Mappo,' the guardian cut in. 'The Trell. He has walked at Icarium's side too long, it seems. There are duties that surpass friendship. The Elders scarred him deep when they destroyed an entire settlement and laid the blame at Icarium's feet. They imagined that would suffice. A Watcher was needed, desperately. The one who had held that responsibility before had taken his own life. For months Icarium walked the land alone, and the threat was too great.'

The words reached into Fiddler, tore at his insides. *No, Mappo believes Icarium destroyed his home, murdered his family, everyone he knew. No, how could you have done that?*

'The Azath has worked towards this taking for a long time, mortals.' The man turned then. Huge tusks framed his thin mouth, jutting from his lower lip. The greenish cast of his weathered skin made him look ghostly, despite the hearth's warm light. Eyes the colour of dirty ice regarded them.

Fiddler stared, seeing what he could not believe – the resemblance was unmistakeable, every feature an echo. His mind reeled.

'My son must be stopped – his rage is a poison,' the Jaghut said. 'Some responsibilities surpass friendship, surpass even blood.'

'We are sorry,' Apsalar said quietly after a long moment, 'but the task was ever beyond us, beyond those you see here.'

The cold, unhuman eyes studied her. 'Perhaps you are right. It is my turn to apologize. I had such ... hopes.'

'Why?' Fiddler whispered. 'Why is Icarium so cursed?'

The Jaghut cocked his head, then abruptly swung back to the fire. 'Wounded warrens are a dangerous thing. *Wounding* one is far more so. My son sought a way to free me from the Azath. He failed. And was ... damaged. He did not understand – and now he never will – that I am content here. There are few places in all the realms that offer a Jaghut peace, or, rather, such peace as we are capable of achieving. Unlike your kind, we yearn for solitude, for that is our only safety.'

He faced them again. 'For Icarium, of course, there is another irony. Without memory, he knows nothing of what once motivated him. He knows nothing of wounded warrens or the secrets of the Azath.' The Jaghut's sudden smile was a thing of pain. 'He knows nothing of me, either.'

Apsalar lifted her head suddenly, 'You are Gothos, aren't you?'

He did not answer.

Fiddler's gaze was drawn to a bench against the near wall. He hobbled to it and sat down. Leaning his head against the warm stone wall, he closed his eyes. *Gods, our struggles are as nothing, our inner scars naught but scratches. Bless you, Hood, for your gift of mortality. I could not live as these* Ascendants *do – I could* not *so torture my soul. . .*

'It is time for you to leave,' the Jaghut rumbled. 'If you are ailing with wounds, you shall find a bucket of water near the front door – the water has healing properties. This night is rife with unpleasantries in the streets beyond, so tread with care.'

Apsalar turned, meeting Fiddler's eyes as he blinked them open and struggled to focus through his tears. *Oh, Mappo, Icarium . . . so entwined . . .*

'We must go,' she said.

He nodded, pushed himself to his feet. 'I could do with a drink of water,' he muttered.

Crokus was taking a last look around, at the faded tapestries, the ornate bench, the pieces of stone and wood placed on ledges, finally at the numerous scrolls stacked on a desktop against the wall opposite the double doors. With a sigh he backed away. Apsalar's father followed.

They returned to the hall and approached the entranceway. The bucket stood to one side, a wooden ladle hanging from a hook above it.

Apsalar took the ladle, dipped it into the water, offered it to Fiddler.

He drank deep, then barked in pain as an appallingly swift mending gripped his ankle. A moment later it passed. He sagged, suddenly covered in sweat. The others eyed him. 'For Hood's sake,' the sapper panted, 'don't drink unless you truly need it.'

Apsalar replaced the ladle.

The door opened at a touch, revealing a night sky and a shambles of a yard. A flagstone path wound its way to an arched gate. The entire grounds were enclosed by a low stone wall. Tenement houses rose beyond, every shutter closed.

'Well?' Crokus asked, turning to Fiddler.

'Aye. Malaz City.'

'Damned ugly.'

'Indeed.'

Testing his ankle and finding not a single tremor of pain, Fiddler walked down the path to the arched gate. In the dark pool of its shadow, he looked out onto the street.

No movement. No sound.

'I don't like this at all.'

'Sorcery has touched this city,' Apsalar pronounced. 'And I know its taste.'

Fiddler eyes narrowed on her. 'Claw?'

She nodded.

The sapper swung his pack around to reach beneath the flap. 'That means close-up scuffles, maybe.'

'If we're unlucky.'

He withdrew two sharpers. 'Yeah.'

'Where to?' Crokus whispered.

Damned if I know. 'Let's try Smiley's – it's a tavern both Kalam and I know well...'

They stepped out from the gate.

A huge shadow unfolded before them, revealing a hulking, ungainly shape.

Apsalar's hand shot out and stilled Fiddler's arm even as he prepared to throw. 'No, wait.'

The demon tilted a long-snouted head their way, regarding them with one silver eye. Then a figure astride its shoulder leaned into view. A youth, stained in old blood, his face a human version of the beast's.

'Aptorian,' Apsalar said in greeting.

The youth's fanged mouth opened and a rasping voice emerged. 'You seek Kalam Mekhar.'

'Yes,' Apsalar answered.

'He approaches the keep on the cliff—'

Fiddler started. 'Mock's Hold? Why?'

The rider cocked his head. 'He wishes to see the Empress?'

The sapper spun, eyes straining towards the towering bastion. A dark pennant flapped from the weathervane. 'Hood take us, she's here!'

'We shall guide you,' the rider said, offering a ghastly smile.

'Through Shadow – safe from the Claw.'

Apsalar smiled in return. 'Lead on, then.'

There was no slowing of pace as they rode towards the foot of wide stone stairs leading up the cliff face.

Kalam gripped Minala's arm. 'You'd better slow—'

'Just hold tight,' she growled. 'They aren't so steep.'

They aren't so steep? Fener's—

Muscles surged beneath them as the stallion plunged forward. Before the beast's hooves struck the stones, however, the world shifted into formless grey. The stallion screamed and reared back, but too late. The warren swallowed them.

Hooves skidded wildly beneath them. Kalam was thrown to one side, met a wall and was scraped off. A polished floor rose up to meet him, punched the air from his lungs. The crossbow flew from his hands and skittered away. Gasping, the assassin slowly rolled over.

They had arrived in a musty hallway, and the stallion was anything but pleased. The ceiling was high and arched, with an arm's reach to spare above the rearing animal. Somehow Minala had stayed in the saddle. She struggled to calm the stallion, and a moment later succeeded, leaning forward to rest one hand lightly just behind its flaring nostrils.

With a groan, Kalam climbed to his feet.

'Where are we?' Minala hissed, staring up and down the long, empty hall.

'If I'm correct, Mock's Hold,' the assassin muttered, retrieving the crossbow. 'The Empress knows we're coming – seems she's grown impatient...'

'If that's the case, Kalam, we're as good as dead.'

He was not inclined to disagree, but said nothing, stepping past the horse and eyeing the doors at the far end. 'I think we're in the Old Keep.'

'That explains the dust – even so, it smells like a stable.'

'Not surprising – half this building's been converted into just that. The Main Hall remains, though.' He nodded towards the doors. 'Through there.'

'No other approaches?'

He shook his head. 'None surviving. Her back door will be a warren, in any case.'

Minala grunted and climbed down from the saddle. 'Do you think she's been watching?'

'Magically? Maybe – you're wondering if she knows about you.' He hesitated, then handed her the crossbow. 'Let's pretend she doesn't. Hold back – I'll lead the stallion through.'

She nodded, cocking the weapon.

He looked at her. 'How in Hood's name did you get here?'

'The Imperial transport that left a day after *Ragstopper.* This horse wasn't out of place among Pormqual's breeders. We, too, were caught in that cursed storm, but the only real trouble came when we had to disembark from the bay. That's a swim I don't want to repeat. Ever.'

The assassin's eyes widened. 'Hood's breath, woman!' He looked away, then back. 'Why?'

She bared her teeth. 'Can you really be that dense, Kalam? In any case, was I wrong?'

There were some barriers the assassin had never expected to be breached. Their swift crumble left him breathless. 'All right,' he finally said, 'but I'll have you know, I'm anything but subtle.'

Her brows arched. 'You could have fooled me.'

Kalam faced the doors once again. He was armed with a single knife and had lost too much blood. *Hardly what you'd call properly equipped to assassinate an Empress, but it will have to do . . .* Without another word to Minala, he slipped forward, gathering the stallion's reins. The animal's hooves clopped loudly as they approached the old double doors.

He laid a hand against the wood. The dark-stained planks were sweating. *There's sorcery on the other side. Powerful sorcery.* He stepped back, met Minala's eyes where she stood ten paces back, and slowly shook his head.

She shrugged, lifting the crossbow in her hands.

He faced the doors again and gripped the latch of the one to his left. It lifted silently.

Kalam pushed the door open.

Inky darkness flowed out, bitter cold.

'Step within, Kalam Mekhar,' a woman's voice invited.

He saw little option. He had come for this, though the final shaping was not as he would have liked. The assassin strode into the dark, the stallion following.

'That is close enough. Unlike Topper and his Claw, I do not underestimate you.'

He could see nothing, and the voice seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. The door behind him – slightly ajar – offered a slight lessening of the gloom, but that reached but a pace or two before the blackness absorbed it entirely.

'You've come to kill me, Bridgeburner,' Empress Laseen said in a cool, dry voice. 'All this way. Why?'

The question startled him.

There was wry amusement in her voice as she continued, 'I cannot believe that you must struggle to find your answer, Kalam.'

'The deliberate murder of the Bridgeburners,' the assassin growled. 'The outlawing of Dujek Onearm. The attempted murders of Whiskeyjack, myself and the rest of the Ninth Squad. Old disappearances. A possible hand in Dassem Ultor's death. The assassination of Dancer and the Emperor. Incompetence, ignorance, betrayal...' He let his litany fall away.

Empress Laseen was silent for a long time, then she said in a low tone, 'And you are to be my judge. And executioner.'

'That's about right.'

'Am I permitted a defence?'

He bared his teeth. The voice was coming from everywhere – everywhere but one place, he now realized, the corner off to his left, a corner that he estimated was no more than four strides away. 'You can try, Empress.' *Hood's breath, I can barely stand upright, and she's most likely got wards. As Quick Ben says, when you've got nothing, bluff. . .*

Laseen's tone hardened. 'High Mage Tayschrenn's efforts in Genabackis were misguided. The decimation of the Bridgeburners was not a part of my intentions. Within your squad was a young woman, possessed by a god that sought to kill me. Adjunct Lorn was sent to deal with her—'

'I know about that, Empress. You're wasting time.'

'I do not see it as a waste, given that time may be all I shall enjoy here in the mortal realm. Now, to continue answering your charges. The outlawing of Dujek is a temporary measure, a ruse, in fact. We perceived the threat that was the Pannion Domin. Dujek, however, was of the opinion that he could not deal with it on his own. We needed to fashion allies of enemies, Kalam. We needed Darujhistan's resources, we needed Caladan Brood and his Rhivi and Barghast, we needed Anomander Rake and his Tiste Andii. And we needed the Crimson Guard off our backs. Now, none of those formidable forces are strangers to pragmatism – one and all they could see the threat represented by the Pannion Seer and his rising empire. But the question of trust remained problematic. I agreed to Dujek's plan to cut him and his Host loose. As outlaws, they are, in effect, distanced from the

Malazan Empire and its desires – our answer, if you will, to the issue of trust.'

Kalam's eyes narrowed in thought. 'And who knows of this ruse?'

'Only Dujek and Tayschrenn.'

After a moment he grunted. 'And what of the High Mage? What's his role in all this?'

He heard the smile as she said, 'Ah, well, he remains in the background, out of sight, but there for Dujek should Onearm need him. Tayschrenn is Dujek's – how do you soldiers say it – his *shaved knuckle in* the *hole.'*

Kalam was silent for a long minute. The only sounds in the chamber were his breathing and the slow but steady drip of his blood onto the flagstones. Then he said, 'There are older crimes that remain...' The assassin frowned. *The only sounds . . .*

'Assassinating Kellanved and Dancer? Aye, I ended their rule of the Malazan Empire. Usurped the throne. A most vicious betrayal, in truth. An empire is greater than any lone mortal—'

'Including you.'

'Including me. An empire enforces its own necessities, makes demands in the name of duty – and that particular burden is something you, as a soldier, most certainly understand. I knew those two men very well, Kalam – a claim you cannot make. I answered a necessity I could not avoid, with reluctance, with anguish. Since that time, I have made grievous errors in judgement – and I must live with those—'

'Dassem Ultor—'

'Was a rival. An ambitious man, sworn to Hood. I would not risk civil war, so I struck first. I averted that civil war, and so have no regrets on that.'

'It seems,' the assassin murmured dryly, 'you've prepared for this.' *Oh, haven't you just.*

After a moment she went on. 'So, if Dassem Ultor was sitting here right now, instead of me – tell me, Kalam, do you think he would have let you get this close? Do you think he would have sought to reason with you?' She was silent for a few more breaths, then continued, 'It seems clear that my efforts to disguise the direction of my voice have failed, for you face me directly. Three, perhaps four strides, Kalam, and you can end the reign of Empress Laseen. What do you choose?'

Smiling, Kalam shifted the grip of the knife in his right hand. *Very well, I'll play along.* 'Seven Cities—'

'Will be answered in kind,' she snapped.

Despite himself, the assassin's eyes widened at the anger he heard there. *Well, what do you know! Empress, you did not need your illusions after all. Thus, the hunt ends here.* He sheathed the knife.

And smiled in admiration when she gasped.

'Empress,' he rumbled.

'I – I admit to some confusion...'

I'd not thought *acting one of your fortes, Laseen . . .* 'You could have begged for your life. You could have given more reasons, made more justifications. Instead, you spoke, not with your voice, but with an empire's.' He turned away. 'Your hiding place is safe. I will leave your ... presence—'

'Wait!'

He paused, brows raised at the sudden uncertainty in her voice. 'Empress?'

'The Claw – I can do nothing – I cannot recall them.'

'I know. They deal with their own.'

'Where will you go?'

He smiled in the darkness. 'Your confidence in me is flattering, Empress.' He swung the stallion around, strode to the doorway, then turned back one last time. 'If you meant to ask, will I come for you again? The answer is no.'

Minala was covering the entrance from a few paces away. She slowly straightened as Kalam stepped into the hallway. The crossbow held steady as the assassin pulled the stallion into view, then went around and shut the door.

'Well?' she demanded in a hiss.

'Well, what?'

'I heard voices – murmuring, garbled – is she dead? Did you kill the Empress?'

I *killed a ghost, perhaps. No, a scarecrow I made in Laseen's guise. An assassin should never see the face behind the victim's mask.* 'Naught but mocking echoes in that chamber. We're done here, Minala.'

Her eyes flashed. 'After all this . .. *mocking echoes?* You've crossed three continents to do this!'

He shrugged. 'It's our nature, isn't it? Again and again, we cling to the foolish belief that simple solutions exist. Aye, I anticipated a dramatic, satisfying confrontation – the flash of sorcery, the spray of blood. I wanted a sworn enemy dead by my hand. Instead –' he rumbled a laugh – 'I had an audience with a mortal woman, more or less ...' He shook himself. 'In any case, we've the Claw's gauntlet ahead of us.'

'Terrific. What do we do now, then?'

He grinned. 'Simple – straight down their Hood-damned throat.'

'A foolish belief if ever I've heard one ...'

'Aye. Come on.'

Leading the stallion, they went down the hallway.

The unnatural darkness slowly dissipated in the old Main Hall. Revealed in one corner was a chair on which was seated a withered corpse. Wisps of hair fluttered lightly in a faint draught, the lips were peeled back, the eye sockets two depthless voids.

A warren opened near the back wall and a tall, lean man draped in a dark-green cloak stepped through. He paused in the centre of the chamber, cocked his head towards the double doors opposite, then turned to the corpse on the chair. 'Well?'

Empress Laseen's voice emerged from those lifeless lips. 'No longer a threat.'

'Are you sure, Empress?'

'At some point in our conversation, Kalam realized that I was not here in the flesh, that he would have to resume his hunt. It seemed, however, that my words had an effect. He is not an unreasonable man, after all. Now, if you would kindly call off your hunters.'

'We have been over this – you know that is impossible.'

'I would not lose him, Topper.'

His laugh was a bark. 'I said I cannot call off my hunters, Empress – do you take that to mean you actually expect them to *succeed*[7]. Hood's breath, Dancer himself would have hesitated before taking on Kalam Mekhar. No, better to view this disastrous night as a long-overdue winnowing of the brotherhood's weaker elements ...'

'Generous of you, indeed.'

His smile was wry. 'We have learned lessons in killing this night, Empress. Much to ponder. Besides, I have a victim on which to vent my frustration.'

'Pearl, your favoured lieutenant.'

'Favoured no longer.'

A hint of warning entered Laseen's tone. 'I trust he will recover from your attentions, Topper.'

He sighed. 'Aye, but for the moment I will leave him to sweat.. . and consider Kalam's most pointed lesson. A certain measure of humility does a man good, *I* always say. Would you not agree, Empress?

'Empress?'

I have been talking to a corpse. Ah, Laseen, that is what I love most about you – your extraordinary ability to make one eat one's own words . . .

The captain of the Guard literally stumbled on them as they edged their way alongside the old keep's outer wall. Minala raised the crossbow and the man cautiously held his hands out to the sides. Kalam stepped forward and dragged him into the shadows, then quickly disarmed him.

'All right, Captain,' the assassin hissed. 'Tell me where the Hold's unwelcome guests are hiding.'

'I take it you don't mean yourselves,' the man said, sighing. 'Well, the gatehouse guard's been muttering about figures on the stairs – of course, the old bastard's half blind. But in the grounds here ... nothing.'

'You can do better than that, Captain ... ?'

The man scowled. 'Aragan. And here I am only days away from a new posting ...'

'And that doesn't have to change, with a little co-operation.'

'I've just done the rounds – everything's quiet, as far as I can tell. Mind you, that doesn't mean a thing, does it?'

Minala glanced pointedly up at the pennant flapping from the weathervane above the Hold. 'And your official guest? No bodyguards?'

Captain Aragan grinned. 'Oh, the Empress, you mean.' Something in his tone hinted at great amusement. 'She's not aged well, has she?'

Inky blackness billowed in the courtyard. Minala shouted a warning even as the crossbow bucked in her hands. A voice shouted in pain.

Kalam straight-armed the captain, sending him sprawling to one side, then spun, knife flashing in his hand.

Four Hands of the Claw had appeared – twenty killers were converging on them. Throwing stars hissed through the darkness. Minala cried out, the crossbow flying from her grip as she staggered back. A bucking wave of sorcery rolled over the cobbles – and vanished.

Shadows swirled in the midst of the Hands, adding to the confusion. When something huge and ungainly stepped into view, Kalam's eyes widened with recognition. *Apt!* The demon lashed out. Bodies flew in all directions. The Hand most distant turned as one to meet this new threat. A rock-sized object flew towards them. The five hunters scattered – but too late, as the sharper struck the flagstones.

The explosion sent shards of iron scything through them.

A lone hunter closed with Kalam. Two thin-bladed knives darted forward in a blur. One struck the assassin in his right shoulder, the other missed his face by inches. Kalam's knife fell from nerveless fingers and he reeled back. The hunter leapt at him.

The sack of cloth-tacks intercepted the path of the man's head with a sickening crunch. The hunter dropped to writhe on the ground.

Another sharper detonated nearby. More screams rang through the courtyard.

Hands gripped Kalam's tattered apron, dragged him into the shadows. The assassin weakly struggled. 'Minala!'

A familiar voice whispered close to him. 'We've got her – and Crokus has the stallion—'

Kalam blinked. 'Sorry?'

'It's Apsalar these days, Corporal.'

The shadows closed on all sides. Sounds faded.

'You're full of holes,' Apsalar observed. 'Busy night, I take it.'

He grunted as the knife was slowly withdrawn from his shoulder, and he felt the blood welling in the blade's wake. A face leaned into his view, a

grey-streaked red snarl of beard, a battered soldier's visage that now grinned.

'Hood's breath!' Kalam muttered. 'That's a damned ugly face you've got there, Fid.'

The grin broadened. 'Funny,' Fiddler said, 'I was just thinking the same – and that's what I don't get, what with you finding this flash lady for company—'

'Her wounds—'

'Minor,' Apsalar said from close by.

'Did you get her?' Fiddler asked. 'Did you kill the Empress?'

'No. I changed my mind—'

'Damn, we could – you *what V*

'She's a sweet sack of bones after all, Fid – remind me to tell you the whole tale some time, provided you repay in kind, since I gather you managed to use the Azath gates.'

'Aye, we did.'

'Any problems?'

'Nothing to it.'

'Glad to hear one of us had it easy.' Kalam struggled to sit up. 'Where are we?'

A new voice spoke, sibilant and wry. 'The Realm of Shadow ... My realm!'

Fiddler groaned, looked up. 'Shadowthrone is it now? Kellanved, more like it! We ain't fooled, y' got that? You can hide in those fancy shadows all you like, but you're still just the damned Emperor!'

'Ai, I quail!' The insubstantial figure giggled suddenly, edging back. 'And you, are you not a soldier of the Malazan Empire? Did you not take a vow? Did you not swear allegiance ... to me?'

'To the Empire, you mean!'

'Why quibble about such minor distinctions? The truth remains that the aptorian has delivered you ... to me, to me, to me!'

Sudden clicking, buzzing sounds made the god shift around to face the demon. When the strange noises coming from Apt ceased, Shadowthrone faced the group once again. 'Clever bitch! But we knew that, didn't we? She and that ugly child riding her, agh! Corporal Kalam of the Bridgeburners, it seems you've found a woman – oh, look at her eyes! Such fury! I am impressed, most impressed. And now you wish to settle down, yes? I wish to reward you all!' He gestured with both hands as if delivering blessings. 'Loyal subjects that you all are!'

Apsalar spoke in her cool, detached way. 'I do not seek any reward, nor does my father. We would have our associations severed – with you, with Cotillion, and with every other Ascendant. We would leave this warren, Ammanas, and return to the Kanese coast—'

'And I with them,' Crokus said.

'Oh, wonderful!' the god crooned. 'Synchronous elegance, this fullest of full circles! To the Kanese coast indeed! To the very road where first we met, oh yes. Go, then! I send you with the smoothest of gestures. Go!' He raised an arm and caressed the air with his long, ghostly fingers.

Shadows swept over the three figures, and when they cleared, Apsalar, her father and Crokus had vanished.

The god giggled again. 'Cotillion will be so pleased, won't he just. Now, what of you, soldier? My magnanimity is rarely seen – I have so little of it! Quickly, before I tire of all this amusement.'

'Corporal?' Fiddler asked, crouching beside the assassin. 'Kalam, I ain't too thrilled with a god making offers, if you know what I mean—'

'Well, we haven't heard much of those offers yet, have we? Kell—Shadowthrone, I could do with a rest, if that's what you've in mind.' He glanced across and met Minala's eyes. She nodded. 'Some place safe—'

'Safe! Nowhere safer! Apt shall be at your side, as vigilant as ever! And comfort, oh yes, much comfort—'

'Ugh,' Fiddler said. 'Sounds dull as death. Count me out.'

The god seemed to cock its head. 'In truth, I owe you nothing, sapper. Only Apt speaks for you. Alas, she's acquired a certain ... leverage. And oh, yes, you were a loyal enough soldier, I suppose. You wish to return to the Bridgeburners?'

'No.'

Kalam turned in surprise, to see his friend frowning.

'On our way up to Mock's Hold,' the sapper explained, 'we listened in on a group of guards during a shift-change – seems there's a last detachment of recruits holed up in Malaz Harbour on their way to join Tavore.' He met Kalam's eyes. 'Sorry, Corporal, but I'm for getting involved in putting down that rebellion in your homeland. So, I'll enlist... again.'

Kalam reached out a blood-smeared hand. 'Just stay alive, then, that's all I ask.'

The sapper nodded.

Shadowthrone sighed. 'And with such soldiers, it is no wonder we conquered half a world – no, Fiddler, I do not mock. This once, I do not mock. Though Laseen does not deserve such as you. Nonetheless, when these mists clear, you will find yourself in the alley back of Smiley's Tavern.'

'That will do me fine, Kellanved. I appreciate it.'

A moment later the sapper was gone.

The assassin turned a jaded eye on Shadowthrone. 'You understand, don't you, that I won't try to kill Laseen – my hunt's over. In fact, I'm tempted to warn you and Cotillion off her – leave the Empire to the Empress. You've got your own, right here—'

'Tempted to warn us, you said?' The god swept closer. 'Bite it back, Kalam, lest you come to regret it.' The shadow-wrapped form withdrew again. 'We do as we please. Never forget that, mortal.'

Minala edged to Kalam's side and laid a trembling hand on his uninjured shoulder. 'Gifts from gods make me nervous,' she whispered. 'Especially this one.'

He nodded, in full agreement.

'Oh,' Shadowthrone said, 'don't be like that! My offer stands. Sanctuary, a true opportunity to settle down. Husband and wife, hee hee! No, mother and father! And, best of all, there's no need to wait for children of your own – Apt has found some for you!'

The mists surrounding them suddenly cleared, and they saw, beyond Apt and her charge, a ragtag encampment sprawled over the summit of a low hill. Small figures wandered among the tent rows. Woodsmoke rose from countless fires.

'You wished for their lives,' Shadowthrone hissed in glee. 'Or so Apt claims. Now you have them. Your children await you, Kalam Mekhar and Minala Eltroeb – all thirteen hundred of them!'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The priest of Elder Mael
dreams rising seas ...

Dusk
Sethand

The whirlwind's spinning tunnel opened out onto the plain in an explosion of airborne dust. Wiry, strangely black grasses lay before Sha'ik as she led her train forward. After a moment she slowed her mount. What she had first thought to be humped stones stretching out in all directions she now realized were corpses, rotting under the sun. They had come upon a battlefield, one of the last engagements between Korbolo Dom and Coltaine.

The grasses were black with dried blood. Capemoths fluttered here and there across the scene. Flies buzzed the heat-swollen bodies. The stench was overpowering.

'Souls in tatters,' Heboric said beside her.

She glanced at the old man, then gestured Leoman forward to her other side. 'Take a scouting party,' she told the desert warrior. 'See what lies ahead.'

'Death lies ahead,' Heboric said, shivering despite the heat.

Leoman grunted. 'We are already in its midst.'

'No. This – this is nothing.' The ex-priest swung his sightless eyes towards Sha'ik. 'Korbolo Dom – *what has he done?'*

'We shall discover that soon enough,' she snapped, waving Leoman and his troop forward.

The army of the Apocalypse marched out from the Whirlwind Warren. Sha'ik had attached each of her three mages to a battalion – she preferred them apart, and distanced from her. They had been none too pleased by the order of march, and she now sensed the three sorcerers questing ahead with enhanced sensitivities – questing, then flinching back, L'oric first, then Bidithal and finally Febryl. From three sources came echoes of appalled horror.

And, should I choose it, I could do the same. Reach ahead with unseen fingers to touch what lies before us. Yet she would not.

'There is trepidation in you, lass,' Heboric murmured. 'Do you now finally regret the choices you have made?'

Regret? Oh, yes. Many regrets, beginning with a vicious argument with my sister, back in Unta, a sisterly spat that went too far. A hurt child . . . accusing her sister of killing their parents. One, then the other. Father. Mother. A *hurt child, who had lost all reasons to smile.* 'I have a daughter now.'

She sensed his attention suddenly focusing on her, the old man wondering at this strange turn of thought, wondering, then slowly – in anguish – coming to understand.

Sha'ik went on, 'And I have named her.'

'I've yet to hear it,' the ex-priest said, as if each word edged forward on thinnest ice.

She nodded. Leoman and his scouts had disappeared beyond the next rise. A faint haze of smoke awaited them there, and she wondered at the portent. 'She rarely speaks. Yet when she does... a gift with words, Heboric. A poet's eye. In some ways, as I might have become, given the freedom ...'

'A gift with words, you say. A gift for you, but it may well be a curse for her, one that has little to do with freedom. Some people invite awe whether they like it or not. Such people come to be very lonely. Lonely in themselves, Sha'ik.'

Leoman reappeared, reining in on the crest. He did not wave them to a quicker pace – he simply watched as Sha'ik guided her army forward.

A moment later another party of riders arrived at the desert warrior's side. Tribal standards on display – strangers. Two of the newcomers drew Sha'ik's attention. They were still too distant to make out their features, but she knew them anyway: Kamist Reloe and Korbolo Dom.

'She will not be lonely,' she told Heboric.

'Then feel no awe,' he replied. 'Her inclination will be to observe, rather than participate. Mystery lends itself to such remoteness.'

'I can feel no awe, Heboric,' Sha'ik said, smiling to herself.

They approached the waiting riders. The ex-priest's attention stayed on her as they guided their horses up the gentle slope.

'And,' she continued, 'I understand remoteness. Quite well.'

'You have named her Felisin, haven't you?'

'I have.' She turned her head, stared into his sightless eyes. 'It's a fine name, is it not? It holds such ... promise. A fresh innocence, such as that which parents would see in their child, those bright, eager eyes—'

'I wouldn't know,' he said.

She watched the tears roll down his weathered, tattooed cheeks, feeling detached from their significance, yet understanding that his observation was not meant as a condemnation. *Only loss.* 'Oh, Heboric,' she said. 'It's not worthy of grief.'

Had she thought a moment longer before speaking those words, she would have realized that they, beyond any others, would break the old man. He seemed to crumple inward before her eyes, his body shuddering. She reached out a hand he could not see, almost touched him, then withdrew it – and even as she did so, she knew that a moment of healing had been lost.

Regrets? Many. Unending.

'Sha'ik! I see the goddess in your eyes!' The triumphant claim was Kamist Reloe's, his face bright even as it seemed twisted with tension. Ignoring the mage, she fixed her gaze on Korbolo Dom. *Half-Napan – he reminds me of my old tutor, even down to the cool disdain in his expression.* Well, *this man has nothing to teach me.* Clustered around the two men were the warleaders of the various tribes loyal to the cause. There was something like shock in their faces, intimations of horror. Another rider was now visible, seated with equanimity on a mule, wearing the silken robes of a priest. He alone seemed untroubled, and Sha'ik felt a shiver of unease.

Leoman sat his horse slightly apart from the group. Sha'ik already sensed a dark turmoil swirling between the desert warrior and Korbolo Dom, the renegade Fist.

With Heboric at her side, she reached the crest and saw what lay beyond. In the immediate foreground was a ruined village – a scattering of smouldering houses and buildings, dead horses, dead soldiers. The stone-built entrance to the Aren Way was blackened with smoke.

The road stretched away in an even declination southward. The trees lining it to either side ...

Sha'ik nudged her horse forward. Heboric matched her, silent and hunched, shivering in the heat. Leoman rode to flank her on the other side. They approached the Aren Gate.

The group wheeled to follow, in silence.

Kamist Reloe spoke, the faintest quaver in his voice. 'See what has been made of this proud gate? The Malazan Empire's Aren Gate is now Hood's Gate, Seer. Do you see the significance? Do you—'

'Silence!' Korbolo Dom growled.

Aye, *silence.* Let *silence tell this tale.*

They passed beneath the gate's cool shadow and came to the first of the trees, the first of the bloated, rotting bodies nailed to them. Sha'ik halted.

Leoman's scouts were approaching at a fast canter. Moments later they arrived, reined in.

'Report,' Leoman snapped.

Four pale faces regarded them, then one said, 'It does not change, sir. More than three leagues – as far as we could see. There are – there are *thousands.'*

Heboric pulled his horse to one side, nudged it closer to the nearest tree and squinted up at the closest corpse.

Sha'ik was silent for a long minute, then, without turning, she said, 'Where is your army, Korbolo Dom?'

'Camped within sight of the city—'

'You failed to take Aren, then.'

'Aye, Seer, we failed.'

'And Adjunct Tavore?'

'The fleet has reached the bay, Seer.'

What *will you make of this, sister?*

'The fools surrendered,' Korbolo Dom said, his voice betraying his own disbelief. 'At High Fist Pormqual's command. And that is the Empire's new weakness – what used to be a strength: those soldiers obeyed the command. The Empire has lost its great leaders—'

'Has it now?' She finally faced him.

'Coltaine was the last of them, Seer,' the renegade Fist asserted. 'This new Adjunct is untested – a noble-born, for Hood's sake. Who awaits her in Aren? Who will advise her? The Seventh is gone. Pormqual's army is gone. Tavore has an army of recruits. About to face veteran forces three times their number. The Empress has lost her mind, Seer, to think that this pureblood upstart will reconquer Seven Cities.'

She turned away from him and stared down the Aren Way. 'Withdraw your army, Korbolo Dom. Link up with my forces here.'

'Seer?'

'The Apocalypse has but one commander, Korbolo Dom. Do as I say.'

And silence once again tells its tale.

'Of course, Seer,' the renegade Fist finally grated.

'Leoman.'

'Seer?'

'Encamp our own people. Have them bury the dead on the plain.'

Korbolo Dom cleared his throat. 'And once we've regrouped – what do you propose to do then?'

Propose? 'We shall meet Tavore. But the time and place shall be of my choosing, not hers.' She paused, then said, 'We return to Raraku.'

She ignored the shouts of surprise and dismay, ignored the questions flung at her, even as they rose into demands. *Raraku – the heart of my newfound power. I shall need that embrace . . . if I am to defeat this fear – this terror – of my sister. Oh, Goddess, guide me now . . .*

The protests, eliciting no responses, slowly died away. A wind had picked up, moaned through the gate behind them.

Heboric's voice rose above it. 'Who is this? I can see nothing – can sense nothing. Who is this man?'

The corpulent, silk-clad priest finally spoke. 'An old man, Unhanded One. A soldier, no more than that. One among ten thousand.'

'Do – do you...' Heboric slowly turned, his milky eyes glistening. 'Do you hear a god's laughter? Does anyone hear a god's laughter?'

The Jhistal priest cocked his head. 'Alas, I hear only the wind.'

Sha'ik frowned at Heboric. He looked suddenly so ... small.

After a moment she wheeled her horse around. 'It is time to leave. You have your orders.'

Heboric was the last, sitting helpless on his horse, staring up at a corpse that told him nothing. There was no end to the laughter in his head, the laughter that rode the wind sweeping through Aren Gate at his back.

What am I not meant to see? Is it you who have truly blinded me now, Fener? Or is it that stranger of jade who flows silent within me? Is this a cruel joke . . . or some land of mercy?

See what has become of your wayward son, Fener, and know – most assuredly know – that I wish to come home.

I wish to come home.

Commander Blistig stood at the parapet, watching the Adjunct and her retinue ascend the broad limestone steps that led to the palace gate directly beneath him. She was not as old as he would have liked, but even at this distance he sensed something of the rumoured hardness in her. An attractive younger woman walked at her side – Tavore's aide and lover, it was said – but Blistig could not recall if he'd ever heard her name. On the Adjunct's other flank strode the captain of her family's own house guard, a man named Gimlet. He had the look of a veteran, and that was reassuring.

Captain Keneb arrived. 'No luck, Commander.'

Blistig frowned, then sighed. The scorched ship's crew had disappeared almost immediately after docking and offloading the wounded soldiers from Coltaine's Seventh. The garrison commander had wanted them present for the Adjunct's arrival – he suspected Tavore would desire to question them – *and Hood knows, those irreverent bastards could do with a blistering...*

'The Seventh's survivors have been assembled for her inspection, sir,' Keneb said.

'Including the Wickans?'

'Aye, and both warlocks among them.'

Blistig shivered despite the sultry heat. They were a frightening pair. So cold, so silent. *Two children who are not.*

And Squint was still missing – the commander well knew that it was unlikely he would ever see that man again. Heroism and murder in a single gesture would be a hard thing for any person to live with. He only hoped that they wouldn't find the old bowman floating face down in the harbour.

Keneb cleared his throat. 'Those survivors, sir .. .'

'I know, Keneb, I know.' *They're broken. Queen's mercy, so broken. Mended flesh can do only so much. Mind you, I've got my own troubles with the garrison – I've never seen a company so . . . brittle.*

'We should make our way below, sir – she's almost at the gate.'

Blistig sighed. 'Aye, let's go meet this Adjunct Tavore.'

Mappo gently laid Icarium down in the soft sand of the sinkhole. He'd rigged a tarp over his unconscious friend, sufficient for shade, but there was little he could do about the stench of putrefaction that hung heavy in the motionless air. It was not the best of smells for the Jhag to awaken to .. .

The ruined village was behind them now, the black gate's shadow unable to reach to where Mappo had laid out the camp beside the road and its ghastly sentinels. The Azath warren had spat them out ten leagues to the north, days ago now. The Trell had carried Icarium in his arms all that way, seeking a place free of death – he'd hoped to have found it by now. Instead, the horror had worsened.

Mappo straightened at the sound of wagon wheels clattering on the road. He squinted against the glare. A lone ox pulled a flatbed cart up Aren Way. A man sat hunched on the buck-board seat, and there was motion behind him – two more men crouched down on the bed, bent to some unseen task.

Their progress was slow, as the driver stopped the cart at every tree, the man spending a minute or so staring up at the bodies nailed to it, before

moving on to the next one.

Picking up his sack, Mappo made his way towards them.

On seeing him, the driver drew the cart to a halt and set the brake. He casually reached over the back of the seat and lifted into view a massive flint sword, which he settled sideways across his thighs.

'If you mean trouble, Trell,' the driver growled, 'back away now or you'll regret it.'

The other two men straightened up at this, both armed with crossbows.

Mappo set down his sack and held out both hands. All three men were strangely hued, and the Trell sensed a latent power in them that made him uneasy. 'The very opposite of trouble, I assure you. For days now I've walked among the dead – you're the first living people I've seen in that time. Seeing you has been a relief, for I had feared I was lost in one of Hood's nightmares ...'

The driver scratched his red-bearded jaw. 'I'd say you are at that.' He set his sword down, twisted around. 'Reckon it's all right, Corporal – besides, maybe he has some bandages we can barter from him or something.'

The older of the two men on the flatbed swung down to the ground and approached Mappo.

The Trell said, 'You have injured soldiers? I've some skill in healing.'

The corporal's smile was taut, pained. 'I doubt you'd want to waste your skills. We ain't got hurt people in the wagon – we got a pair of dogs.'

'Dogs?'

'Aye. We found them at the Fall. Seems Hood didn't want 'em ... not right away, anyway. Personally, I can't figure out why they're still alive – they're so full of holes and chopped up ...' He shook his head.

The driver had climbed down as well, and was making his way up to the end of the road, studying each and every corpse before moving on.

Mappo gestured the driver's way. 'You're looking for someone.'

The corporal nodded. 'We are, but the bodies are pretty far gone, it's kind of hard to tell for sure. Still, Stormy says he'll know him when he sees him, if he's here.'

Mappo's gaze flicked from the corporal, travelled down Aren Way. 'How far does this go?'

'The whole way, Trell. Ten thousand soldiers, give or take.'

'And you've ...'

'We've checked them all.' The corporal's eyes narrowed. 'Well, Stormy's up to the last few, anyway. You know, even if we wasn't looking for someone particular ... well, at the very least...' He shrugged.

Mappo looked away, his own face tightening. 'Your friend mentioned something called the Fall. What is that?'

'The place where Coltaine and the Seventh went down. The dogs were the only survivors. Coltaine guided thirty thousand refugees from Hissar to Aren. It was impossible, but that's what he did. He saved those ungrateful bastards and his reward was to get butchered not five hundred paces from the city's gate. No-one helped him, Trell.' The corporal's eyes searched Mappo's. 'Can you imagine that?'

'I am afraid I know nothing of the events you describe.'

'So I guessed. Hood knows where you've been hiding lately.'

Mappo nodded. After a moment he sighed. 'I'll take a look at your dogs, if you like.'

'All right, but we don't hold out much hope. Thing is, the lad's gone and taken to 'em, if you know what I mean.'

The Trell walked to the cart and clambered aboard.

He found the lad hunched down over a mass of red, torn flesh and bone, feebly waving flies from the flesh.

'Hood's mercy,' Mappo whispered, studying what had once been a cattle-dog. 'Where's the other one?'

The youth pulled back a piece of cloth, revealing a lapdog of some kind. All four legs had been deliberately broken. Pus crusted the breaks and the creature shook with fever.

'That little one,' the youth said. 'It was left lying on this one.' His tone was filled with pain and bewilderment.

'Neither one will make it, lad,' Mappo said. 'That big one should have died long ago – it may well be dead now—'

'No. No, he's alive. I can feel his heart, but it's slowing. It's slowing, and we can't do nothing. Gesler says we should help it along, that slowing, we should end its pain, but maybe ... maybe ...'

Mappo watched the lad fuss over the hapless creatures, his long-fingered, almost delicate hands daubing the wounds with a blood-soaked piece of cloth. After a moment, the Trell straightened, slowly turning to stare down the long road. He heard a shout behind him, close to the gate, then heard the corporal named Gesler running to join Stormy.

Ah, Icarium. Soon you will awaken, and still I shall grieve, and so lead you to wonder . . . My *grief begins with you, friend, for your loss of memories – memories not of horror, but of gifts given so freely . . . Too many dead . . . how to answer this? How would you answer this, Icarium?*

He stared for a long time down Aren Way. Behind him the lad crouched over the cattle-dog's body, while the crunch of boots approached slowly from up the road. The cart pitched as Stormy clambered up to take his seat. Gesler swung himself into the flat-bed, expressionless.

The youth looked up. 'You find him, Gesler? Did Stormy find him?'

'No. Thought for a minute ... but no. He ain't here, lad. Time to head back to Aren.'

'Queen's blessing,' the youth said. 'Then there's always a chance.'

'Aye, who can say, Truth, who can say.'

The lad, Truth, returned his attention to the cattle-dog.

Mappo slowly turned, met the corporal's eyes and saw the lie writ plain. The Trell nodded.

'Thanks for taking a look at the dogs, anyway,' Gesler said. 'I know, they're finished. I guess we wanted ... well, we would have liked ...' His voice fell away, then he shrugged. 'Want a ride back to Aren?'

Mappo shook his head and climbed down to stand at the roadside. 'Thank you for the offer, Corporal. My kind aren't welcome in Aren, so I'll pass.'

'As you like.'

He watched them turn the cart around.

How would you answer this . . .

They were thirty paces down the road when the Trell shouted. They halted, Gesler and Truth straightening to watch as Mappo jogged forward, rummaging in his pack as he did so.

Iskaral Pust padded down the rock-strewn, dusty path. He paused to scratch vigorously beneath his tattered robes, first one place, then another, then another. A moment later he shrieked and began tearing at his clothes.

Spiders. Hundreds of them, spinning away, falling to the ground, scattering into cracks and crevices as the High Priest thrashed about.

'I knew it!' Iskaral screamed. 'I knew it! Show yourself! I dare you!'

The spiders reappeared, racing over the sun-baked ground.

Gasping, the High Priest staggered back, watching as the D'ivers sembled into human form. He found himself facing a wiry, black-haired woman. Though she was an inch shorter than him, her frame and features bore a startling resemblance to his own. Iskaral Pust scowled.

'You thought you had me fooled? You thought I didn't know you were lurking about!'

The woman sneered. 'I *did* have you fooled! Oh, how you hunted! Thick-skulled idiot! Just like every Dal Honese man I've ever met! A thick-skulled idiot!'

'Only a Dal Honese woman would say that—'

'Aye, and who would know better!'

'What is your name, D'ivers?'

'Mogora, and I've been with you for months. Months! I saw you lay the false trail – I saw you painting those hand and paw marks on the rocks! I saw you move that stone to the forest's edge! My kin may be idiots, but I am not!'

'You'll never get to the real gate!' Iskaral Pust shrieked. 'Never!'

'I – don't – want – to!'

His eyes narrowed on her sharp-featured face. He began circling her. 'Indeed,' he crooned, 'and why is that?'

Twisting to keep him in front of her, she crossed her arms and regarded him down the length of her nose. 'I escaped Dal Hon to be rid of idiots. Why would I become Ascendant just to rule over *other* idiots?'

'You are a true Dal Honese hag, aren't you? Spiteful, condescending, a sneering bitch in every way!'

'And you are a Dal Honese oaf – conniving, untrustworthy, shifty—'

'Those are all words for the same thing!'

'And I've plenty more!'

'Let's hear them, then.'

They began down the trail, Mogora resuming her litany. 'Lying, deceitful, thieving, shifty—'

'You said that one already!'

'So what? *Shifty*, slimy, slippery ...'

The enormous undead dragon rose silently from its perch on the mesa's summit, wings spreading to glow with the sun's light, even as the membrane dimmed the colour that reached through. Black, flat eyes glanced down at the two figures scrambling towards the cliff face.

The attention was momentary. Then an ancient warren opened before the soaring creature, swallowed it whole, then vanished.

Iskaral Pust and Mogora stared at the spot in the sky for a moment longer. A half-grin twitched on the High Priest's features. 'Ah, *you* weren't fooled, were you? You came here to guard the true gate. Ever mindful of your duties, you T'lan Imass. You Bonecasters with your secrets that drive me mad!'

'You were born mad,' Mogora muttered.

Ignoring her, he continued addressing the now vanished dragon. 'Well, the crisis is past, isn't it? Could you have held? Against all those children of yours? Not without Iskaral Pust, oh no! Not without me!'

Mogora barked a contemptuous laugh.

He threw her a glare, then scampered ahead.

Stopping beneath the lone, gaping window high in the cliff tower, he screamed, 'I'm home! I'm home!' The words echoed forlornly, then faded.

The High Priest of Shadow began dancing in place, too agitated to remain still, and he kept dancing as a minute passed, then another. Mogora watched him, one eyebrow raised.

Finally a small, brown head emerged from the window and peered down.

The bared fangs might have been a smile, but Iskaral Pust could not be sure of that. He could never be sure of that.

'Oh, look,' Mogora murmured, 'one of your fawning worshippers.'

'Aren't you funny.'

'What I am is hungry. Who's going to prepare meals now that Servant's gone?'

'You are, of course.'

She flew into a spitting rage. Iskaral Pust watched her antics with a small smile on his face. *Ah, glad to see I've not lost my charm . . .*

The enormous, ornate wagon stood in a cloud of dust well away from the road, the horses slow to lose their terror, stamping, tossing their heads.

Two knee-high creatures scampered from the wagon and padded on bandy legs towards the road, their long arms held out to the sides. Outwardly, they resembled bhok'arala, their small, wizened faces corkscrewing as they squinted in the harsh sunlight.

Yet they were speaking Daru.

'Are you sure?' the shorter of the pair said.

The other snarled in frustration. 'I'm the one who's linked, right? Not you, Irp, not you. Baruk would never be such a fool as to task you with anything – except grunt work.'

'You got that right, Rudd. Grunt work. I'm good at that, ain't I? Grunt work. Grunt, grunt, grunt – you sure about this? Really sure?'

They made their way up the bank and approached the last tree lining the road. Both creatures squatted down before it, staring up in silence at the withered corpse nailed to the bole.

'I don't see nothing,' Irp muttered. 'I think you're wrong. I think you've lost it, Rudd, and you won't admit it. I think—'

'I'm one word away from killing you, Irp, I swear it.'

'Fine. I die good, you know. Grunt, gasp, grunt, sigh ... grunt.'

Rudd ambled to the tree's base, the few stiff hairs of his hackles the only sign of his simmering temper. He clambered upward, pulled himself onto the chest of the corpse and rummaged with one hand beneath the rotted shirt. He plucked loose a tattered, soiled piece of cloth. Unfolding it, he frowned.

Irp's voice rose from below. 'What is it?'

'A name's written on here.'

'Whose?'

Rudd shrugged. '"Sa'yless Lorthal."'

'That's a woman's name. He's not a woman, is he?'

'Of course not!' Rudd snapped. A moment later he tucked the cloth back under the shirt. 'Mortals are strange,' he muttered, as he began searching beneath the shirt again. He quickly found what he sought, and drew forth a small bottle of smoky glass.

'Well?' Irp demanded.

'It broke all right,' Rudd said with satisfaction. 'I can see the cracks.' He leaned forward and bit through the thong, then, clutching the bottle in one hand, scrambled back down. Crouched at the base, he held the bottle to the sun and squinted through it.

Irp grunted.

Rudd then held the bottle against one pointed ear and shook it. 'Ah! He's in there all right!'

'Good, let's go—'

'Not yet. The body comes with us. Mortals are particular that way – he won't want another. So, go get it, Irp.'

'There's nothing left of the damned thing!' Irp squawked.

'Right, then it won't weigh much, will it?'

Grumbling, Irp climbed the tree and began pulling out the spikes.

Rudd listened to his grunts with satisfaction, then he shivered. 'Hurry up, damn you! It's eerie around here.'

The Jhag's eyes fluttered open and slowly focused on the wide, bestial face looking down on him. Puzzled recognition followed. 'Mappo Trell. My friend.'

'How do you feel, Icarium?'

He moved slightly, winced. 'I – I am injured.'

'Aye. I'm afraid I gave away my last two elixirs, and so could not properly heal you.'

Icarium managed a smile. 'I am certain, as always, that the need was great.'

'You may not think so, I'm afraid. I saved the lives of two dogs.'

Icarium's smile broadened. 'They must have been worthy beasts. I look forward to that tale. Help me up, please.'

'Are you certain?'

'Yes.'

Mappo supported Icarium as he struggled to his feet. The Jhag tottered, then found his balance. He raised his head and looked around. 'Where – where are we?'

'What do you remember?'

'I – I remember nothing. No, wait. We'd sighted a demon – an aptorian, it was, and decided to follow it. Yes, that I recall. That.'

'Ah, well, we are far to the south, now, Icarium. Cast out from a warren. Your head struck a rock and you lost consciousness. Following that aptorian was a mistake.'

'Evidently. How – how long?'

'A day, Icarium. Just a day.'

The Jhag had steadied, visibly regaining strength until Mappo felt it safe to step away, though one hand remained on Icarium's shoulder.

'West of here lies the Jhag Odhan,' the Trell said.

'Yes, a good direction. I admit, Mappo, I feel close this time. Very close.'

The Trell nodded.

'It's dawn? Have you packed up our camp?'

'Aye, though I suggest we walk but a short distance today – until you're fully recovered.'

'Yes, a wise decision.'

It was another hour before they were ready to leave, for Icarium needed to oil his bow and set a whetstone to his sword. Mappo waited patiently, seated on a boulder, until the Jhag finally straightened and turned to him, then nodded.

They set off, westward.

After a time, as they walked on the plain, Icarium glanced at Mappo. 'What would I do without you, my friend?'

The nest of lines framing the Trell's eyes flinched, then he smiled ruefully as he considered his reply. 'Perish the thought.'

As it reached into the wasteland known as the Jhag Odhan, the plain stretched before them, unbroken.

EPILOGUE

Hood's sprites are revealed
the disordered host
Whispering of deaths
in wing-flap chorus

Dour music has its own
beauty, for the song of ruin
is most fertile.

Wickan Dirge
Fisher

The young widow, a small clay flask clutched in her hands, left the horsewife's yurt and walked out into the grassland beyond the camp. The sky overhead was empty and, for the woman, lifeless. Her bare feet stepped heavily, toes snagging in the yellowed grass.

When she'd gone thirty paces she stopped and lowered herself to her knees. She faced the vast Wickan plain, her hands resting on her swollen belly, the horsewife's flask smooth, polished and warm beneath the calluses.

The searching was complete, the conclusions inescapable. The child within her was ... *empty.* A thing without a soul. The vision of the horsewife's pale, sweat-beaded face rose to hover before the young woman, her words whispering like the wind. *Even a warlock must ride a soul – the children they claimed were no different from children they did not claim. Do you understand? What grows within you possesses . . . nothing. It has been cursed – for reasons only the spirits know.*

The child within you must be returned to the earth.

She unstoppered the flask. There would be pain, at least to begin with, then a cooling numbness. No-one from the camp would watch, all eyes averted from this time of shame.

A storm cloud hung on the north horizon. She had not noticed it before. It swelled, rolled closer, towering and dark.

The widow raised the flask to her lips.

A hand swept over her shoulder and clamped onto her wrist. The young woman cried out and twisted around to see the horsewife, her breath coming in gasps, her eyes wide as she stared at the storm cloud. The flask fell to the ground. Figures from the camp were now running towards the two women.

The widow searched the old woman's weathered face, seeing fear and ... *hope*? 'What? What is it?'

The horsewife seemed unable to speak. She continued staring northward.

The storm cloud darkened the rolling hills. The widow turned and gasped. The cloud was not a cloud. It was a swarm, a seething mass of black, striding like a giant towards them, tendrils spinning off, then coming around again to rejoin the main body.

Terror gripped the widow. Pain shot up her arm from where the horsewife still clutched her wrist, a hold that threatened to snap bones.

Flies.' *Oh, spirits below – flies . . .*

The swarm grew closer, a flapping, tumbling nightmare.

The horsewife screamed in wordless anguish, as if giving voice to a thousand grieving souls. Releasing the widow's wrist, she fell to her knees.

The young woman's heart hammered with sudden realization.

No, not flies. Crows. Crows, so many crows—

Deep within her, the child stirred.

This ends the Second Tale of the
Malazan Book of the Fallen

GLOSSARY

TRIBES OF THE SEVEN SUBCONTINENTS

Arak: Pan'potsun Odhan
Bhilard: east of Nenoth Odhan
Can'eld: northeast of Ubaryd
Debrahl: north regions
Dhis'bahl: Omari and Nahal Hills
Gral: Ehrlitan foothills down to Pan'potsun
Kherahn Dhobri: Geleen Plain
Khundryl: west of Nenoth Odhan
Pardu: north of Geleen Grasslands
Semk: Karas Hills and Steppes
Tithan: south of Sialk
Tregyn: west of Sanimon

SEVEN CITIES (Bisbrna and Debrand

Language
(Selected Words)

bhok'arala: a squall of cliff-dwelling winged monkeys (common)
(bhok'aral: singular)
bloodfly: a biting insect
chigger fleas: windborne fleas of the desert
dhenrabi: a large marine carnivore
Dryjhna: the Apocalypse

durhang: an opiate
emrag: an edible cactus favoured by Trell
emulor: a poison derived from flowers
enkar'al: a winged reptile equivalent in size to a horse (very rare)
esanthan'el: a dog-sized winged reptile
guldindha: a broad-leafed tree
jegura: a medicinal cactus
kethra knife: a fighting weapon
Marrok: dry-season siesta
Mezla: vaguely pejorative name for Malazans
odhan: plains, wastelands
rhizan: a squirrel-sized winged lizard (common)
sawr'ak: a thin light beer served cold
sepah: unleavened bread
She'gai: a hot wind of the dry season
simharal: a seller of children
tapu: a food-hawker
tapuharal: a seller of goat meat (cooked)
tapusepah: a seller of bread
taputasr: a seller of pastries
tasr: sepah with honey
telaba: a sea cloak of the Dosii (Dosin Pali)
tralb: a poison derived from mushrooms
White Paralt: a poison derived from spiders

PLACE NAMES

Aren: Holy City and site of Imperial Headquarters
Balahn (Battle of)
Bat'rol: a small village near Hissar
Caron Tepasi: an inland city
Chain of Dogs Coltaine's train of soldiers and refugees journeying from Hissar to Aren
Dojal Spring (Battle of)
Dosin Pali: a city on the south coast of Otataral Island
Ehrlitan: Holy City

G'danisban: a city near Pan'potsun
Geleen: a city on the coast of the Clatar Sea
Gelor Ridge (Battle of Gelor)
Guran: an inland city
Hissar: a city on the east coast
Holy Desert Raraku: a region west of the Pan'potsun Odhan
Karakarang: a Holy City on Otataral Island
Nenoth (Battle of)
Pan'potsun: Holy City
Rutu Jelba: a port city on north Otataral Island
Sanimon (Battle of)
Sekala Plain (Battle of)
Sialk: a city on the east coast
The Path of Hands: a Soletaken and D'ivers path to Ascendancy
Tremorlor (the Azath House in the Wastes, also Odhanhouse)
Ubaryd: a Holy City on the south coast
Vathar Crossing (Coltaine's Crossing, the Vathar Massacre): the Day of Pure Blood, Mesh'arn tho'ledann
Vin'til Basin: southwest of Hissar

THE WORLD OF SORCERY

THE WARRENS: (the Paths – those Warrens accessible to humans)

Denul: the Path of Healing

D'riss: the Path of Stone

Hood's Path: the Path of Death

Meanas: the Path of Shadow and Illusion

Ruse: the Path of the Sea

Rashan: the Path of Darkness

Sere: the Path of the Sky

Tennes: the Path of the Land

Thyr: the Path of Light

THE ELDER WARRENS

Kurald Galain: the Tiste Andii Warren of Darkness

Kurald Emurlahn: the Tiste Edur Warren

Tellann: the T'lan Imass Warren

Omtose Phellack: the Jaghut Warren

Starvald Demelain: the Tiam Warren, the First Warren

TITLES AND GROUPS

First Sword of Empire: Malazan and T'lan Imass, a title denoting an Imperial champion

Fist: a military governor in the Malazan Empire

High Fist: a commander of armies in a Malazan Campaign

Kron T'lan Imass: the name of the clans under the command of Kron

Logros T'lan Imass: the name of the clans under the command of Logros

The Bridgeburners: a legendary elite division in the Malaz 2nd Army

The Pannion Seer: a mysterious prophet ruling the lands south of Darujhistan

The Warlord: the name for Caladan Brood

The Claw: the covert organization of the Malazan Empire

PEOPLES (HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN)

Barghast (non-human): pastoral nomadic warrior society

Forkrul Assail (non-human): extinct mythical people (one of the Four Founding Races)

Jaghut (non-human): extinct mythical people (one of the Four Founding Races)

Moranth (non-human): highly regimented civilization centred in Cloud Forest

T'lan Imass: one of the Four Founding Races, now immortal

Tiste Andii (non-human): an Elder Race

Tiste Edur (non-human): an Elder Race

Trell (non-human): pastoral nomadic warrior society

THE DECK OF DRAGONS: THE FATID (AND ASSOCIATED ASCENDANTS)

High House Life

King

Queen (Queen of Dreams)

Champion

Priest

Herald

Soldier

Weaver

Mason Virgin

High House Death

King (Hood)

Queen

Knight (once Dassem Ultor)

Magi

Herald

Soldier

Spinner

Mason

Virgin

High House Light

King

Queen

Champion

Priest

Captain

Soldier

Seamstress

Builder

Maiden

High House Dark

King

Queen

Knight (Son of Darkness)

Magi

Captain

Soldier

Weaver

Mason

Wife

High House Shadow

King (Shadowthrone/Ammanas)

Queen

Assassin (the Rope/Cotillion)

Magi

Hound

Unaligned:

Oponn (the Jesters of Chance)

Obelisk (Burn)

Crown

Sceptre

Orb

Throne

Bonecaster: a shaman of the T'lan Imass

D'ivers: a higher order of shapeshifting

Otataral: a magic-negating reddish ore mined from the Tanno Hills, Seven Cities

Soletaken: an order of shape-shifting

Warrens of Chaos: the miasmic paths between the Warrens

ASCENDANTS

Apsalar, Lady of Thieves

Bern, Lord of Storms

Burn, Lady of the Earth, the Sleeping Goddess

Caladan Brood, the Warlord

Cotillion/The Rope (the Assassin of High House Shadow)

Dessembrae, Lord of Tragedy

D'rek, the Worm of Autumn (sometimes the Queen of Disease, *see* Poliel)

Fanderay, She-Wolf of Winter

Fener, the Boar (see also Tennerock)

Gedderone, Lady of Spring and Rebirth

Great Ravens, ravens sustained by magic

Hood (King of High House Death)

Jhess, Queen of Weaving

Kallor, the High King

K'rul, Elder God

Mael, Elder God

Mown, Lady of Beggars, Slaves and Serfs

Nerruse, Lady of Calm Seas and Fair Wind

Oponn, Twin Jesters of Chance

Osserc, Lord of the Sky

Poliel, Mistress of Pestilence

Queen of **Dreams** (Queen of High House Life)

Shadowthrone/Ammanas (King of High House Shadow)

Shedenul/Soliel, Lady of Health

Soliel, Mistress of Healing

Tennerock/Fener, the Boar of Five Tusks

The Crippled God, King of Chains

The Hounds (of High House Shadow)

Togg (see Fanderay), the Wolf of Winter

Trake/Treach, the Tiger of Summer and Battle

Son of Darkness/Moon's lord/Anomander Rake (Knight of High House Dark)

Treach, First Hero

Steven Erikson's epic fantasy sequence continues in *Memories of Ice*, also available from Bantam Books. Here is the Prologue as a taster ...

The ancient wars of the T'lan Imass and the Jaghut
saw the world torn asunder. Vast armies contended
on the ravaged lands, the dead piled high, their bone
the bones of hills, their spilled blood the blood of seas.
Sorceries raged until the sky itself was fire ...

Kinick Karbar'n *Ancient Histories, Vol. 1*

Maeth'ki lm (Pogrom of the Rotted Flower), the 33rd Jaghut *War 298,665 years before Burn's Sleep*

Swallows darted through the clouds of midges dancing over the mudflats. The sky above the marsh remained grey, but it had lost its mercurial wintry gleam, and the warm wind sighing through the air above the ravaged land held the scent of healing.

What had once been the inland freshwater sea the T'lan called Jaghra Til – born from the shattering of the Jaghut ice-fields – was now in its own death-throes. The pallid overcast was reflected in dwindling pools and stretches of knee-deep water for as far south as the eye could scan, but nonetheless, newly birthed land dominated the vista.

The breaking of the sorcery that had raised the glacial age had returned to the region the old, natural seasons, but the memories of mountain-high ice lingered. The exposed bedrock to the north was gouged and scraped, its basins filled with boulders. The heavy silts that had formed the floor of the inland sea still bubbled with escaping gases, as the land, freed of the enormous weight with the glacier's passing eight years ago, slowly rose.

Jaghra Til's life had been short, yet the silts that had settled on its bottom were thick. And treacherous.

Pran Chole, Bonecaster of Cannig Tol's clan among the Kron T'lan, sat motionless atop a mostly buried boulder along an ancient beach ridge. The descent before him was snarled in low, wiry grasses and withered driftwood. Twelve paces beyond, the land dropped slightly, then stretched out into a broad basin of mud. Three ranag had become trapped in a boggy sinkhole twenty paces into the basin. A bull male, his mate and their calf, ranged in a pathetic defensive circle. Mired and vulnerable, they must have seemed easy kills for the pack of ay that found them. But the land was treacherous indeed. The large tundra wolves had succumbed to the same fate as the ranag. Pran Chole counted six ay, including a yearling. Tracks indicated that another yearling had circled the sinkhold dozens of times before wandering westward, doomed no doubt to die in solitude.

How long ago had this drama occurred? There was no way to tell. The mud had hardened on ranag and ay alike, forming cloaks of clay latticed with cracks. Spots of bright green showed where windborn seeds had germinated, and the Bonecaster was reminded of his visions when spiritwalking – a host of mundane details twisted into something unreal. For the beasts, the struggle had become eternal, hunter and hunted locked together for all time.

Someone padded to his side, crouched down beside him. Pran Chole's tawny eyes remained fixed on the frozen tableau. The rhythm of footsteps told the Bonecaster the identity of his companion, and now came the warm-blooded smells that were as much a signature as resting eyes upon the man's face.

Cannig Tol spoke. 'What lies beneath the clay, Bonecaster?'

'Only that which has shaped the clay itself, Clan Leader.'

'You see no omen in these beasts?'

Pran Chole smiled. 'Do you?'

Cannig Tol considered for a time, then said, 'Ranag are gone from these lands. So too the ay. We see before us an ancient battle. These statements have depth, for they stir my soul.'

'Mine as well,' the Bonecaster conceded.

'We hunted the ranag until they were no more, and this brought starvation to the ay, for we had also hunted the tenag until they were no more too. The agkor who walk with the bhederin would not share with the ay, and now the tundra is empty. From this, I conclude that we were wasteful and thoughtless in our hunting.'

'Yet the need to feed our own young—'

'The need for more young was great.'

'It remains so, Clan Leader.'

Cannig Tol grunted. 'The Jaghut are powerful in these lands, Bonecaster. They did not flee – not at first. You know the cost in Imass blood.'

'And the land yields its bounty to answer that cost.'

'To serve our war.'

'Thus, the depths are stirred.'

The Clan Leader nodded and was silent. Pran Chole waited. In their shared words they still tracked the skin of things. Revelation of the muscle and bone was yet to come. But Cannig Tol was no fool, and the wait was not long.

'We are as those beasts.'

The Bonecaster's eyes shifted to the south horizon, tightened.

Cannig Tol continued. 'We are the clay, and our endless war against the Jaghut is the struggling beast beneath. The surface is shaped by what lies beneath.' He gestured with one hand. 'And before us now, in these creatures slowly turning to stone, is the curse of eternity.' There was still more. Pran Chole said nothing. 'Ranag and ay,' Cannig Tol resumed. 'Almost gone from the mortal realm. Hunter and hunted both.'

'To the very bones,' the Bonecaster whispered.

'Would that you had seen an omen,' the Clan Leader muttered, rising.

Pran Chole also straightened. 'Would that I had,' he agreed in a tone that only faintly echoed Cannig Tol's wry, sardonic utterance.

'Are we close, Bonecaster?'

Pran Chole glanced down at his shadow, studied the antlered silhouette, the figure hinted at within the furred cape, ragged hides and headdress. The sun's angle made him seem tall – almost as tall as a Jaghut. 'Tomorrow,' he said. 'They are weakening. A night of travel will weaken them yet more.'

'Good. Then the clan shall camp here tonight.'

The Bonecaster listened as Cannig Tol made his way back down to where the others waited. With darkness, Pran Chole would spiritwalk into the whispering earth, seeking those of his own kind. While their quarry was weakening, Cannig Tol's clan was yet weaker. Less than a dozen adults remained. When pursuing Jaghut, the distinction of hunter and hunted had little meaning.

He lifted his head and sniffed the crepuscular air. Another Bonecaster wandered this land. The taint was unmistakable. He wondered who it was, wondered why it travelled alone, bereft of clan and kin. And, knowing that even as Pran had sensed its presence so it in turn had sensed his, he wondered why it had not yet sought them out.

She pulled herself clear of the mud and dropped down onto the sandy bank, her breath coming in harsh, laboured gasps. Her son and daughter squirmed free of her leaden arms, crawled further onto the island's modest hump. The Jaghut mother lowered her head until her brow rested against the cool, damp sand. Grit pressed into the skin of her forehead with raw insistence. The burns there were too recent to have healed, nor were they likely to. She was defeated, and death had only to await the arrival of her hunters.

They were mercifully competent, at least. These T'lan Imass cared nothing for torture. A swift killing blow. For her, then for her children. And with them – this meagre, tattered family – the last of the Jaghut would

vanish from this continent. Mercy arrived in many guises. Had they not joined in chaining Raest, they would all – Imass and Jaghut both – have found themselves kneeling before the Tyrant. A temporary truce of expedience. She'd known enough to flee once the chaining was done; she'd known, even then, that the Imass clan would resume the pursuit. The mother felt no bitterness, but that made her no less desperate.

Sensing a new presence on the small island, her head snapped up. Her children had frozen in place, staring up in terror at the Imass woman who now stood before them. The mother's grey eyes narrowed. 'Clever, Bonecaster. My senses were tuned only to those behind us. Very well, be done with it.'

The young, black-haired woman smiled. 'No bargains, Jaghut? You always seek bargains to spare the lives of your children. Have you broken the kin-threads with these two, then? They seem young for that.'

'Bargains are pointless. Your kind never agree to them.'

'No, yet still *your* kind try.'

'I shall not. Kill us, then. Swiftly.'

The Imass was wearing the skin of a panther. Her eyes were as black and seemed to match its shimmer in the dying light. She looked well-fed, her large, swollen breasts indicating that she had recently birthed. The Jaghut mother could not read the woman's expression, only that it lacked the typical grim certainty she usually associated with the strange, rounded faces of the T'lan Imass.

The Bonecaster spoke. 'I have enough Jaghut blood on my hands. I leave you to the Kron clan that shall find you tomorrow.'

'To me,' the mother growled, 'it matters naught which of you kills us, only that you kill us.'

The woman's broad mouth quirked. 'I can see your point.'

Weariness threatened to overwhelm the Jaghut mother, but she managed to pull herself into a sitting position. 'What,' she asked between gasps, 'do

you want?'

'To offer you a bargain.'

Breath catching, the Jaghut mother stared into the Bonecaster's dark eyes, and saw nothing of mockery. Her gaze then dropped, for the briefest of moments, on her son and daughter, then back up to hold steady on the woman's own.

The T'lan Imass nodded slowly.

The earth had cracked some time in the past, a wound of such depth as to birth a molten river wide enough to stretch from horizon to horizon. Vast and black, the river of stone and ash reached southwestward, down to the distant sea. Only the smallest of plants had managed to find purchase, and the Bonecaster's passage – a Jaghut child in the crook of each arm – raised sultry clouds of dust that hung motionless in her wake.

She judged the boy at perhaps five years of age; his sister perhaps four. Neither seemed entirely aware, and clearly neither had understood their mother when she'd hugged them goodbye. The long flight down the L'Amath and across the Jaghra Til had driven them both into shock. No doubt witnessing the ghastly death of their father had not helped matters. They clung to her with their small, grubby hands, grim reminders of the child she had but recently lost. Before long, both began suckling at her breasts, evincing desperate hunger. Some time later, the children slept.

The lava flow thinned as she approached the coast. A range of hills rose into distant mountains on her right. A level plain stretched directly before her, ending at a ridge half a league distant. Though she could not see it, she knew that on the other side of the ridge, the land slumped down to the sea. The plain itself was marked by regular humps, the mounds were arrayed in concentric circles, and at the centre was a larger dome – all covered in a mantle of lava and ash. The rotted tooth of a ruined tower rose from the plain's edge, at the base of the first line of hills. Those hills, as she had noted the first time she had visited this place, were themselves far too evenly spaced to be natural.

The Bonecaster lifted her head. The mingled scents were unmistakable, one ancient and dead, the other.. . less so. The boy stirred in her clasp, but remained asleep.

'Ah,' she murmured, 'you sense it as well.'

Skirting the plain, she walked towards the blackened tower.

The gate was just beyond the ragged edifice, suspended in the air at about six times her height. She saw it as a red welt, a thing damaged, but no longer bleeding. She could not recognize the warren – the old damage obscured the portal's characteristics. Unease rippled faintly through her.

The Bonecaster set the children down by the tower, then sat on a block of tumbled masonry. Her gaze fell to the two young Jaghut, still curled in sleep, lying on their beds of ash. 'What choice?' she whispered. 'It must be Omtose Phellack. It certainly isn't Tellann. Starvald Demelain? Unlikely.' Her eyes were pulled to the plain, narrowing on the mound rings. 'Who dwelt here? Who else was in the habit of building in stone?' She fell silent for a long moment, then swung her attention back to the ruin. 'This tower is the final proof, for it is naught else but Jaghut, and such a structure would not be raised this close to an inimical warren. No, the gate is Omtose Phellack. It must be so.'

Still, there were additional risks. An adult Jaghut in the warren beyond, coming upon two children not of its own blood, might as easily kill them as adopt them. 'Then their deaths stain another's hands, a Jaghut's.' Scant comfort, that distinction. *It matters not which of you kills us, only that you kill us.* The breath hissed between the woman's teeth. 'What choice?' she asked again.

She would let them sleep a little longer. Then, she would send them through the gate. A word to the boy – *take care of your sister. The journey shall not be long.* And to them both – *your mother waits beyond.* A lie, but they would need courage. *If she cannot find you, then one of her kin will. Go then, to safety, to salvation.*

After all, what could be worse than death?

She rose as they approached. Pran Chole tested the air, frowned. The Jaghut had not unveiled her warren. Even more disconcerting, where were her children?

'She greets us with calm,' Cannig Tol muttered.

'She does,' the Bonecaster agreed.

'I've no trust in that – we should kill her immediately.'

'She would speak with us,' Pran Chole said.

'A deadly risk, to appease her desire.'

'I cannot disagree, Clan Leader. Yet. . . what has she done with her children?'

'Can you not sense them?'

Pran Chole shook his head. 'Prepare your spearmen,' he said, stepping forward.

There was peace in her eyes, so clear an acceptance of her own imminent death that the Bonecaster was shaken. He walked through shin-deep water, then stepped onto the island's sandy bank to stand face to face with the Jaghut. 'What have you done with them?' he demanded.

The mother smiled, the skin peeling back to reveal her tusks. 'Gone.'

'Where?'

'Beyond your reach, Bonecaster.'

Pran Chole's frown deepened. 'These are our lands. There is no place here that is beyond our reach. Have you slain them with your own hands?'

The Jaghut cocked her head, studied the T'lan Imass. 'I had always believed you were united in your hatred of our kind. I had always believed that such concepts as compassion and mercy were alien to your natures.'

The Bonecaster stared at the woman, then his gaze dropped away, past her, and scanned the soft clay ground. 'A T'lan Imass has been here,' he

said. 'A woman. The Bonecaster—' *The one I could not find in my spiritwalk. The one who chose not to be found.* 'What has she done?'

'She has explored this land,' the Jaghut replied. 'She has found a gate far to the south. It is Omtose Phellack.'

'I am glad,' Pran Chole said, 'I am not a mother.' *And you, woman, should be glad I am not cruel.* He gestured. Heavy spears flashed past the Bonecaster. Six long, fluted heads of flint punched through the skin covering the Jaghut's chest. She staggered, then folded to the ground in a clatter of spearshafts.

Thus ended the 33rd Jaghut War.

Pran Chole whirled. 'We've no time for a pyre. We must strike southwards. Quickly.'

Cannig Tol stepped forward as his warriors went to retrieve their weapons. The Clan Leader's eyes narrowed on the Bonecaster. 'What distresses you?'

'A renegade Bonecaster has taken the children.'

'South?'

'To Morn.'

The Clan Leader's brows knitted.

'The renegade believes the Rent to be Omtose Phellack.'

Pran Chole watched the blood leave Cannig Tol's face. 'Go to Morn, Bonecaster,' he whispered. 'We are not cruel. Go now.'

Pran Chole bowed. The Tellann warren engulfed him.

The faintest release of her power sent the two Jaghut children upward, into the gate's maw. The girl cried out a moment before reaching it, a longing wail for her mother, whom she imagined waited beyond. Then the two small figures vanished within.

The Bonecaster sighed and continued to stare upward, seeking any evidence that the passage had gone awry. It seemed, however, that no wound had reopened, no gush of wild power from the portal. Did it look different? She could not be sure. This was new land for her; she had nothing of the bone-bred sensitivity that she had known all her life among the lands of the Tarad clan, in the heart of the First Empire.

The Tellann warren opened behind her. The woman spun around, moments from veering into her Soletaken form. An arctic fox bounded into view, slowed upon seeing her, then sembled back into its Imass form. She saw before her a young man, wearing the skin of his totem animal across his shoulders, and a battered antler headdress. His expression was twisted with fear, his eyes not on her, but on the portal beyond.

The woman smiled. 'I greet you, fellow Bonecaster. Yes, I have sent them through. They are beyond the reach of your vengeance, and this pleases me.'

His tawny eyes fixed on her. 'Who are you? What clan?'

'I have left my clan, but I was once counted among the Logros. I am named Kilava.'

'You should have let me find you last night,' Pran Chole said. 'I would then have been able to convince you that a swift death was the greater mercy for those children than what you have done here, Kilava.'

'They are young enough to be adopted—'

'You have come to the place called Morn,' Pran Chole interjected, his voice cold. 'To the ruins of an ancient city—'

'Jaghut—'

'Not Jaghut! This tower, yes, but it was built long afterwards, in the time between the city's destruction and the T'ol Ara'd, which but buried something already dead.' He raised a hand, pointed towards the suspended gate. 'It was this – this wounding – that destroyed the city, Kilava. The warren beyond – do you not understand? It is *not* Omtose Phellack! Tell me this – how are such wounds sealed? You know the answer, Bonecaster!'

The woman slowly turned, studied the Rent. 'If a soul sealed that wound, then it should have been freed... when the children arrived—'

'Freed,' Pran Chole hissed, *'in exchange!'*

Trembling, Kilava faced him again. 'Then where is it? Why has it not appeared?'

Pran Chole turned to study the central mound on the plain. 'Oh,' he whispered, 'but it has.' He glanced back at his fellow Bonecaster. 'Tell me, will you in turn give up your life for those children? They are trapped now, in an eternal nightmare of pain. Does your compassion extend to sacrificing yourself in yet another exchange?' He sighed. 'I thought not, so wipe away those tears, Kilava. Hypocrisy ill suits a Bonecaster.'

'What...' the woman managed after a time, 'what has been freed?'

Pran Chole shook his head. He studied the mound again. 'I am not sure, but we shall have to do something about it, sooner or later, Kilava. I suspect we have plenty of time. The creature must now free itself of its tomb, and that has been thoroughly warded. More, there is the T'ol Ara'd's mantle of stone still clothing the barrow.' After a moment, he added, 'but time we shall have.'

'"What do you mean?'

'The Gathering has been called. The Ritual of Tellann awaits us, Bonecaster.'

She spat. 'You are all insane. To choose immortality for the sake of a war – madness. I shall defy the call, Bonecaster.'

He nodded. 'Yet the Ritual shall be done. I have spiritwalked into the future, Kilava. I have seen my withered face of two hundred thousand and more years hence. We shall have our eternal war.'

Bitterness filled Kilava's voice. 'My brother shall be pleased.'

'Who is your brother?'

'Onos T'oolan, the First Sword.'

Pran Chole turned at this. 'You are the Defier. You slaughtered your clan – your kin—'

'To break the link and thus achieve freedom, yes. Alas, my eldest brother's skills more than matched mine. Yet now we are *both* free, though what I celebrate, Onos T'oolan curses.' She wrapped her arms around herself, and Pran Chole saw upon her layers and layers of pain. Hers was a freedom he did not envy. She spoke again. 'This city, then. Who built it?'

'K'Chain Che'Malle.'

'I know the name, but little else of them.'

Pran Chole nodded. 'We shall, I expect, learn.'

Korelri and Jacuruku, in the Time of Dying
119,736 Years before Burn's Sleep (three years after the Fall of the Crippled God)

The Fall had shattered a continent. Forests had burned, the firestorms lighting the horizon in every direction, bathing crimson the heaving ash-filled clouds blanketing the sky. The conflagration had seemed unending, world-devouring, and through it all could be heard the screams of a god.

Pain gave birth to rage. Rage to poison, an infection sparing no-one.

Scattered survivors remained, reduced to savagery, wandering a landscape pocked with huge craters now filled with murky, lifeless water, the sky churning endlessly above them. Kinship had been dismembered, love had proved a burden too costly to carry. They ate what they could, often each other, and scanned the ravaged world around them with rapacious intent.

One figure walked alone. Wrapped in rotting rags, he was of average height, his features blunt and unprepossessing. There was a dark cast to his face, a heavy inflexibility in his eyes. He walked as if gathering suffering unto himself, unmindful of its vast weight, walked as if incapable of yielding, of denying the gifts of his own spirit.

In the distance, ragged bands eyed the figure as he strode, step by step, across what was left of the continent that would one day be called Korelri. Hunger might have driven them closer, but there were no fools left among the survivors of the Fall, and so they maintained a watchful distance, their curiosity dulled by fear. For the man was an ancient god, and he walked among them.

Beyond the suffering he absorbed, K'rul would have willingly embraced their broken souls, yet he had fed – was feeding – on the blood spilled onto this land, and the truth was this: the power born of that would be needed.

In K'rul's wake, men and women killed men, killed women, killed chidren. Dark slaughter was the river the Elder God rode.

Elder Gods embodied a host of harsh unpleasantries.

The foreign god had been torn apart in his descent to earth. He had come down in pieces, in streaks of flame. His pain was fire, screams and thunder, a voice that had been heard by half the world. Pain, and outrage. And, K'rul reflected, grief. It would be a long time before the foreign god could begin to reclaim the remaining fragments of its life, and so begin to unveil its nature. K'rul feared that day's arrival. From such a shattering could only come madness.

The summoners were dead, destroyed by what they had called down upon them. There was no point in hating them, no need to conjure up images of what they in truth deserved by way of punishment. They had, after all, been desperate. Desperate enough to part the fabric of chaos, to open a way into an alien, remote realm; to then lure a curious god of that realm closer, ever closer to the trap they had prepared. The summoners sought power.

All to destroy one man.

The Elder God has crossed the ruined continent, had looked upon the still-living flesh of the Fallen God, had seen the unearthly maggots that crawled forth from that rotting, pulsing meat and broken bone. Had seen what those maggots flowered into. Even now, as he reached the battered shoreline of Jacuruku, the ancient sister continent to Korelri, they wheeled above him on their broad, black wings. Sensing the power within him, they were hungry

for its taste. But a strong god could ignore the scavengers that trailed in his wake, and K'rul was a strong god. Temples had been raised in his name. Blood had for generations soaked countless altars. The nascent cities were wreathed in the smoke of forges, pyres, the red glow of humanity's dawn. The First Empire had risen, on a continent half a world away from where K'rul now walked. An empire of humans, born from the legacy of the T'lan Imass.

But it had not been alone for long. Here, on Jacuruku, in the shadow of long-dead K'Chain Che'Malle ruins, another empire had emerged. Brutal, a devourer of souls, its ruler was a warrior without equal. K'rul had come to destroy him, had come to snap the chains of twelve million slaves – even the Jaghut Tyrants had not commanded such heartless mastery over their subjects. No, it took a mortal human to achieve this level of tyranny over his kin.

Two other Elder Gods were converging on the Kallorian Empire. The decision had been made. The three – last of the Elders – would bring to a close this High King's despotic rule. K'rul could sense his companions. Both were close; both had been comrades once, but they all, K'rul included, had changed, had drifted far apart. This would mark the first conjoining in millennia.

He could sense a fourth presence as well, a savage, ancient beast following his spoor. A beast of the earth, of winter's frozen breath, a beast with white fur bloodied, wounded almost unto death by the Fall. A beast with but one surviving eye to look upon the destroyed land that had once been its home long before the empire's rise. Trailing, but coming no closer. And, K'rul well knew, it would remain a distant observer to all that was about to occur. The Elder god could spare it no sorrow, yet was not indifferent to its pain.

We each survive as we must, and when time comes to die, we find our places of solitude . . .

The Kallorian Empire had spread to every shoreline of Jacuruku, yet K'rul saw no-one as he took his first steps inland. Lifeless wastes stretched out on all sides. The air was grey with ash and dust, the skies overhead churning

like lead in a smith's cauldron. The Elder God experienced the first breath of unease, sidling chill across his soul. Above him the god-spawned scavengers cackled as they wheeled.

A familiar voice spoke in K'rul's mind. *Brother, I am upon the north shore.*

And I the west.'

Are you troubled?

'I am. All is .. . dead.'

Incinerated. The heat remains deep beneath the beds of ash. Ash . . . and bone.

A third voice spoke. *Brothers, I am come from the south, where once dwelt the cities.* All *destroyed. The echoes of a continent's death' cry still linger. Are we deceived? Is this illusion?*

K'rul addressed the first Elder who had spoken in his mind. 'Draconus, I too feel that death-cry. Such pain ... indeed, more dreadful in its aspect than that of the Fallen One. If not a deception as our sister suggests, what has he done?'

We have stepped onto this land, and so all share what you sense, K'rul, Draconus replied. I, *too, am not certain of its truth. Sister, do you approach the High King's abode?*

The third voice spoke. I *do, brother Draconus. Would you and brother K'rul join me now, that we may confront this mortal as one?*

'We shall.'

Warrens opened, one to the far north, the other directly before K'rul.

The two elder Gods joined their sister upon a ragged hilltop where wind swirled through the ashes, spinning funereal wreathes skyward. Directly before them, on a heap of burnt bones, was a throne.

The man seated upon it was smiling. 'As you can see,' he rasped after a moment of scornful regard, 'I have ... prepared for your arrival. Oh yes, I

knew you were coming. Draconus, of Tiam's kin. K'rul, Opener of the Paths.' His grey eyes swung to the third Elder. 'And *you*. My dear, I was under the impression that you had abandoned your .. . old self. Walking among the mortals, playing the role of middling sorceress – such a deadly risk, though perhaps this is what entices you so to the mortal game. You've stood on fields of battles, woman. One stray arrow .. .' He slowly shook his head.

'We have come, Kallor,' K'rul said, 'to end your reign of terror.'

The man's brows rose. 'You would take from me all that I have worked so hard to achieve? Fifty years, dear rivals, to conquer an entire continent. Oh, perhaps Ardatha still held out – always late in sending me my rightful tribute – but I ignored such petty gestures. She has fled, did you know? The bitch. Do you imagine yourselves the first to challenge me? The Circle brought down a foreign god. Aye, the effort went awry, thus sparing me the task of killing the fools with my own hand. And the Fallen One? Well, he'll not recover for some time, and even then, do you truly imagine he will accede to anyone's bidding? I would have—'

'Enough,' Draconus growled. 'Your prattling grows wearisome, Kallor.'

'Very well,' the High King sighed. He leaned forward. 'You've come to liberate my people from my tyrannical rule. Alas, I am not one to relinquish such things. Not to you, not to anyone.' He settled back, waved a languid hand. 'Thus, what you would refuse me, I now refuse you.'

Though the truth was before K'rul's eyes, he could not believe it. 'What have—'

'Are you blind?' Kallor shrieked, clutching at the arms of his throne. 'It is gone! *They* are gone! Break the chains, will you? Go ahead – no, I surrender them! Here, all about you, is *now free*! Dust! Bones! All free!'

'You have in truth incinerated an entire continent?' the sister Elder whispered. 'Jacuruku—'

'It is more, and never again shall be. What I have unleashed will never heal. Do you understand me? Never. And it is all your fault. Yours. Paved in

bone and ash, this noble road you chose to walk. *Your* road.'

'We cannot allow this—'

'It is done, you foolish woman!'

K'rul spoke within the minds of his kin. It *must done. I will fashion a ... a place for this.* Within *myself.*

A warren to hold all this? Draconus asked in horror. My *brother—*

No, it must be done. Join with *me now, this shaping will not be easy—*

It will break you, K'rul, his sister said. There must *be another way.*

None. To leave this continent as it is . . .no, this *world is young. To carry such a scar . . .*

What of Kallor? Draconus inquired. What *of this . . . this creature?*

We mark him, K'rul replied. We *know his deepest desire, do we not? And the span of his life?*

Long, my friends.

Agreed.

K'rul blinked, fixed his dark, heavy eyes on the High King. 'For this crime, Kallor, we deliver appropriate punishment. Know this: you, Kallor Eiderann Tes'thesula, shall know mortal life unending. Mortal, in the ravages of age, in the pain of wounds and the anguish of despair. In dreams brought to ruin. In love withered. In the shadow of Death's spectre, ever a threat to end what you will not relinquish.'

Draconus spoke. 'Kallor Eiderann Tes'thesula, you shall never *ascend.'*

Their sister said, 'Kallor Eiderann Tes'thesula, each time you rise, you shall then fall. All that you achieve shall turn to dust in your hands. As you have wilfully done here, so it shall be in turn visited upon all that you do.'

'Three voices curse you,' K'rul intoned. 'It is done.'

The man on the throne trembled. His lips drew back in a rictus snarl. 'I shall break you. Each of you. I swear this upon the bones of twelve million sacrifices. K'rul, you shall fade from the world, you shall be forgotten. Draconus, what you create shall be turned upon you. And as for you, woman, unhuman hands shall tear your body into pieces, upon a field of battle, yet you shall know no respite – thus, my curse upon you, Sister of Cold Nights. Kallor Eiderann Tes'thesula, one voice, has spoken three curses. Thus.'

They left Kallor upon his throne, upon its heap of bones. They merged their power to draw chains around a continent of slaughter, then pulled it into a warren created for that sole purpose, leaving the land itself bared. To heal.

The effort left K'rul broken, bearing wounds he knew he would carry for all his existence. More, he could already feel the twilight of his worship, the blight of Kallor's curse. To his surprise, the loss pained him less than he would have imagined.

The three stood at the portal of the nascent, eternally lifeless realm, and looked upon their handiwork.

Then Draconus spoke. 'I am forging a sword.'

K'rul and the Sister of Cold Nights nodded, for this was known to them both.

'The power I have invested possesses a ... a finality.'

'Then,' K'rul whispered, 'you must make alterations in the final shaping.'

'So it seems. I shall need to think long on this.'

After a long moment, K'rul and his brother turned to their sister.

She shrugged. 'I shall endeavour to guard myself. When my destruction comes, it will be through betrayal and naught else. There can be no precaution against such a thing, lest my life become its own nightmare of suspicion and mistrust. To this, I shall not surrender. Until that moment, I shall continue to play the mortal game.'

'Careful, then,' K'rul murmured, 'whom you choose to fight for.'

'Find a companion,' Draconus advised. 'A worthy one.'

'Wise words from you both. I thank you.'

There was nothing more to be said. The three had come together, with an intent they had now achieved. Perhaps not in the manner they would have wished, but it was done. And the price had been paid. Willingly. Three lives and one, each destroyed. For the one, the beginning of eternal hatred. For the three, a fair exchange.

Elder Gods, it has been said, embodied a host of unpleasantries.

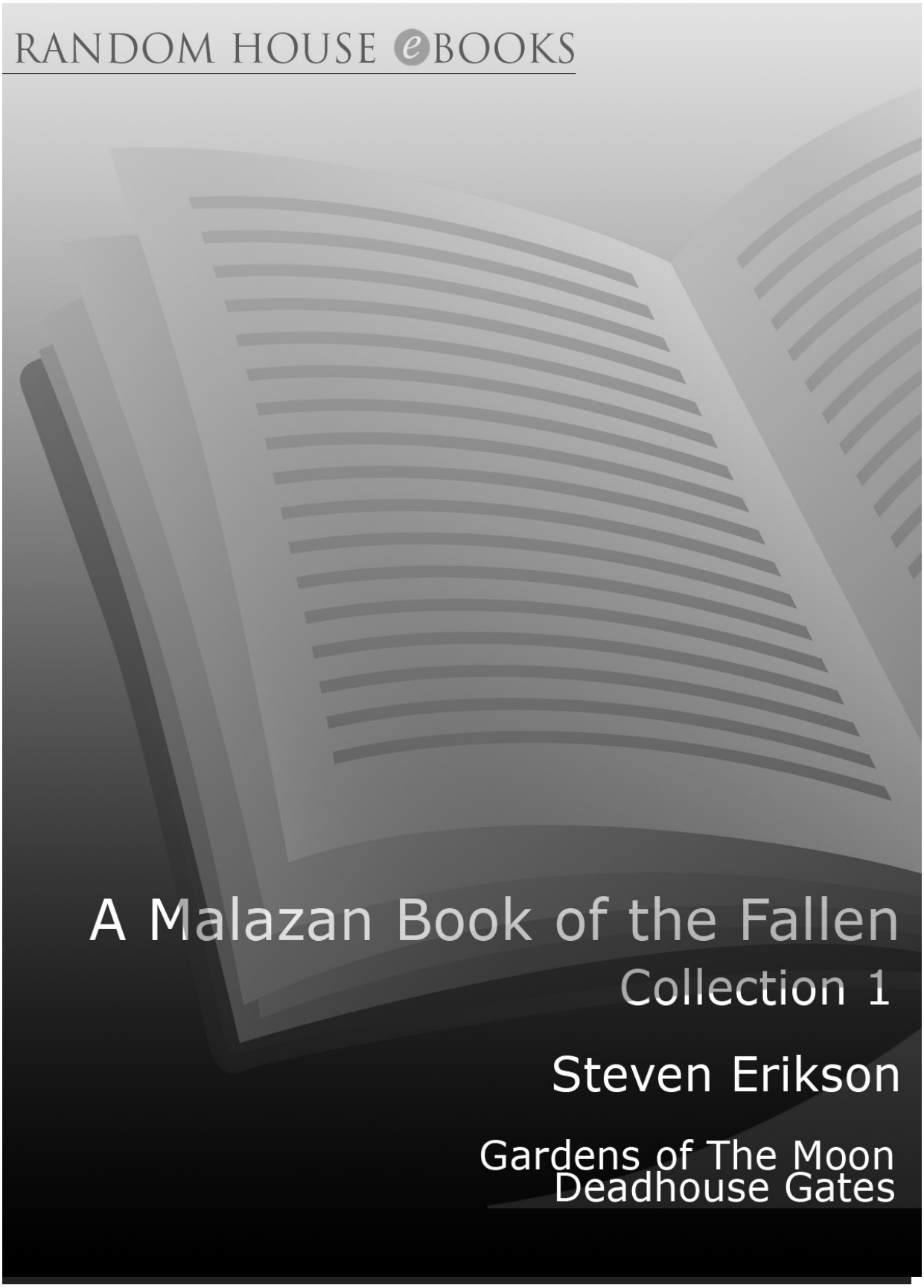
In the distance, the beast watched the three figures part ways. Riven with pain, white fur stained and dripping blood, the gouged pit of its lost eye glittering wet, it held its hulking mass on trembling legs. It longed for death, but death would not come. It longed for vengeance, but those who had wounded it were dead. There but remained the man seated on the throne, the one who had laid waste to the beast's home. Time enough for the settling of that score.

A final longing filled the creature's ravaged soul. Somewhere, amidst the conflagration of the Fall and the chaos that followed, it had lost its mate and was now alone. Perhaps she still lived. Perhaps she wandered, wounded as he was, searching the broken wastes for a sign of him. Or, perhaps she had fled, in pain and terror, to the warren that had given fire to her spirit. Wherever she had gone – assuming she still lived – he would find her.

The three distant figures unveiled warrens, each vanishing into their Elder realms. The beast elected to follow none of them. They were young entities as far as he and his mate were concerned, and the warren she might have fled to was, in comparison to those of the Elder Gods, ancient. The path that awaited him was perilous, and he knew fear in his labouring heart. The portal that opened before him revealed a grey-streaked, swirling storm of power. The beast hesitated, then strode into it.

And was gone.

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